



Hull Student
Accommodation
Rating System
hullstars.com

HULLSTARS
PROCESS >

OUR MISSION

To work proactively with landlords to improve the standard of student accommodation in Hull whilst giving prospective tenants the information they require to make an informed choice when it comes to selecting a property.

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ABOUT

The processes listed in this document form part of the acceptance made when registering with HullSTARS. These processes will be reviewed on an annual basis. Further information for landlords is available from hullstars.com

1. What is the Feedback System?

1.1 Introduction

Auditing and rating properties will only serve to evaluate the standards of individual properties, it does not tell us that landlords and agencies actually practice what they preach, HUU's members have said that they want to tell us this, and they want to be able to listen to what previous tenants have had to say about the properties and the landlords they are looking at.

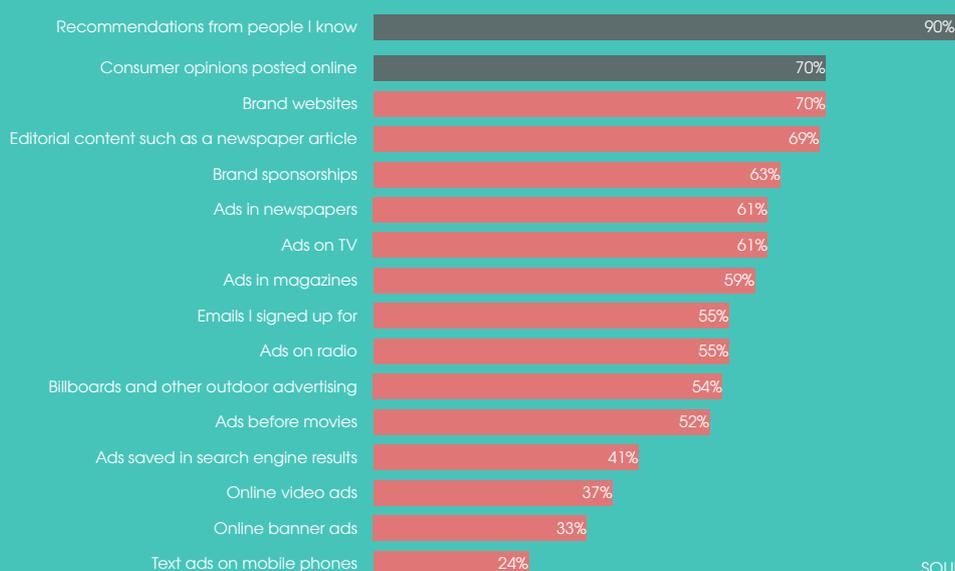
For example: Auditing properties would not tell a prospective tenant how good the landlord is at responding to repair issues, or how easy their vacation process is. The property may not necessarily have been audited during winter; there could be hidden issues that only become relevant during specific seasons of the year. Feedback alongside auditing will help to give prospective tenants all of the information that they need to make an informed decision.

Every year hundreds of students visit HUU's Advice Centre for housing issues as a result of their landlords not completing repairs on their properties; we also know that many students living off campus rate the quality of their accommodation as the most important factor in making their choice. Feedback provides students with a forum through which they can rate both their accommodation and the supplier, whilst also allowing landlords a right of reply to any feedback and the opportunity to proactively improve the services and facilities that they provide.

1.2 Students want to give feedback

HUU's members told us that they would like a rating system for housing provided by students/the Union. In a media-rich environment, users are beginning to trust word-of-mouth marketing more than any other medium.

Other survey figures support these responses: 92% of consumers around the world say they trust earned media, such as word-of-mouth or recommendations from friends and family, above all other forms of advertising – an increase of 18% since 2007, according to a study from Nielsen, a leading global provider of information and insights into what consumers watch and buy. Online consumer reviews are the second most trusted source of brand information and messaging, with 70% of global consumers surveyed online indicating they trust messages on this platform, an increase of 15% in four years.



SOURCE: NIELSEN (2012)

2. What is the HullSTARS Audit?

2.1 Accommodation Audit Ratings

The first part of the system is to audit properties against set weighted criteria. Properties will be given a rating on a scale of 0 to 5 with scores represented by a worded comment as below:

0: Urgent Improvement Necessary	Audit score of 35% or below
1: Major Improvement Necessary	Audit score above 35% but lower than 50%
2: Minor Improvement Necessary	Audit score above 50% but lower than 65%
3: Generally Satisfactory	Audit score above 65% but lower than 80%
4: Good	Audit score above 80% but lower than 90%
5: Very Good	Audit score above 90%

Similar to the food hygiene rating scheme, landlords would be given a certificate which we recommend is to be displayed at the respective property. The certificate is embossed and will detail the address of the property, the date of the inspection, and the date when the rating will expire. This will ensure that certificates are not displayed in the wrong properties in an attempt to falsely advertise that they have been accredited.

2.2 Subscription Pricing

The annual subscription pricing for 2016-17 will be confirmed as follows:

A property, for the purpose of pricing, will comprise of one kitchen and no more than five bedrooms. Each property will be charged at £45. Properties with more than five bedrooms per kitchen will be charged at £2.50 per additional bedroom.

Properties with more than one kitchen will be charged at £45 per kitchen which will include five free bedrooms, any additional bedrooms will incur a £2.50 charge per bedroom.

For those properties over 100 bedrooms (i.e halls of residence) a discount will be applied, and landlords should contact hullstars@hull.ac.uk for a quote.

In addition, HullSTARS is offering biennial subscriptions. To apply for a biennial subscription all you need to do is double the annual fee, pay by either BACS or cheque and notify hullstars@hull.ac.uk. This would then allow one inspection in year one, with your audit validity extended to two years.

Biennial subscriptions will have all of the same benefits of an annual subscription, with the added benefit of a reduced re-inspection fee of £15 per property.

These prices include the auditing and access to the feedback portal of HullSTARS. All fees for the 2016/17 lettings season are payable by 31st October 2016.

2.3 Lettings Policy

Although operated within Hull University Union, HullSTARS has been deliberately ring-fenced from political interference. One of HullSTARS objectives is to work with landlords to help further drive the standards of student accommodation in Hull. It does not benefit HullSTARS, nor any other stakeholders, to potentially ostracise landlords for trying to run a competitive business.

In the medium to long-term, it is expected that the Students' Union working in conjunction with the University, can build upon the success of its "No Pressure" campaign to a point where a majority of students have the confidence to hold back and make an informed choice, which is where HullSTARS comes in to play.

2.4 Rating Period

An accreditation certificate is valid for 53 weeks or 105 from the date of inspection (depending on subscription type), this is termed the "rating period". A landlord may choose for whatever reason not to remain accredited after the 12/24 month period. The HullSTARS website will be promoted and advertised to students/tenants as the only place to get current valid information as to the accreditation status of every property. Action will be taken through the Trades Descriptions Act (1968) for any landlord using the system to misrepresent its property.

2.5 Subscription Period

The subscription period shall always run from 1st September through to 31st August each year.

Should you fail to pay your fees, your rating will still be valid; however it will not be advertised on our website and will be displayed as 'ungraded'. Rating's displayed on StuRents will promptly be removed on expiry of the rating period. Once your fees have been paid we will re-activate your access to the HullSTARS website and with it, any associated property ratings. That rating will then expire as per the timeframe set out above, ready for its next inspection.

3. Governance

3.1 HullSTARS Advisory Committee

The HullSTARS Advisory Committee (HSAC) will act as an expert group with knowledge of the market for student accommodation. The role of the Committee will be to:-

Regularly review the HullSTARS accreditation process and recommend changes to the management of HullSTARS. This will include the System Process dictating any interaction between HullSTARS and individual landlords whose property is audited.

Review and comment on the medium term strategy and annual work plan and recommend changes if necessary.

Recommend independent auditors who will undertake annual sample checks of HullSTARS ratings and review the results of these verifications and if necessary, recommend changes to the accreditation process and the ratings of individual properties.

Give feedback on the day-to-day operations of the accreditation process.

In order to do this, the Advisory Committee will be given regular updates by HullSTARS management prior to each Committee meeting.

Meetings will be held 4 times a year, the week preceding when the appeals panel would be scheduled. Additional meetings may be held or more frequently the members wish. HullSTARS management will respond to recommendations and proposals either in writing to the Committee members or verbally at the meetings if appropriate.

The Committee will comprise:

Hull City Council (2 members)

University of Hull (2 members)

Humber Landlords (2 members)

Hull University Union Ltd (2 members – VP Welfare & Community and Advice Centre Manager)

The Operational Support Manager will chair the meetings, Hull University Union will provide secretarial help for meeting organisation and minute taking. The Chair will approve the minutes for accuracy.

3.2 Appeals Panel

It is important that there is an opportunity to have independent scrutiny of accreditation decisions and ratings. Hull STARS management will consult with the members of the Advisory Committee to determine the makeup of this Panel. It is likely to consist of no more than 3 members who have knowledge of either property matters and/or accreditation schemes and who are independent.

4. Audit Procedure

4.1 Registration

The initial step that needs to be taken is for the landlord/authorised individual to register their properties to be audited. Part of the registration process will involve the submission of relevant legal documentation that acts to sense-check various aspects of the System Code, prior to visiting the respective property.

Once the registration process has been completed (and following payment of the subscription), the HullSTARS Administrator will contact the applicant to arrange for the audit process to be booked.

4.2 Auditing Timescale

We aim to ensure that all properties are audited within 28 days of request where reasonably possible. Should a new landlord approach us with a sizable number of properties, an implementation plan will be mutually agreed in order to ensure that both parties understand what the expected time of audit will be.

4.3 Scheduling the Audits

The nominated contact for the property will be given not less than 10 working days' notice of the verification visit. Wherever possible, however, visits will be undertaken outside the months of July and August and/or when a property is unoccupied. This is because of the importance the audit process attached to the views of existing tenants.

If an audit does not take place within 28 days of the originally scheduled date and this is as a result of the landlord failing to permit the visit to take place or to facilitate the necessary access, all fees are forfeited and new payment is required before completing an audit.

4.4 Audit Documentation

The auditor will produce his/her report digitally, and will ensure that a copy is e-mailed to any relevant persons within 72 hours of the inspection, it will identify any action points which need addressing.

Following the report, the HullSTARS website will be updated with the new rating with no less than four working days notice unless otherwise specified. Certification will be sent out following the reports and website updates.

4.5 Follow-up Action

Following an audit, a landlord may decide to complete some works to rectify any criteria which have received a lower score, and as such a landlord may ask for a visit to be carried out where the accommodation was given a rating below the maximum achievable grading of '5' but has since made improvements to the property's standards. This means the auditing team can check the improvements have been made and see if a new rating should be given. However a re-inspection fee of £20 (£15 for biennial subscriptions) will apply to the first repeat visit, and any further re-visits would be charged at the primary rate of a normal audit.

Re-inspections will only cover the areas where improvements have been made. Improvements should be communicated to the HullSTARS administrator prior to the re-inspection.

4.5 Reinspection of Properties

Since all property ratings are valid for 53 or 105 weeks depending on the subscription type, we expect to be able to hold the repeat audits in the same week every year (should a landlord wish to remain part of the rating system).

5. Complaints & Appeals

5.1 When to Complain

There are only two circumstances in which a complaint can be made:

Landlords or nominated individuals can make a complaint if they feel they have been unfairly treated during the audit process. This could be that the score they have received has been miscalculated, or they may not be happy about a specific decision made in respect to certain criteria.

Tenants of a particular property may seek to complain in the event that they feel that the HullSTARS rating is not a true reflection of the standard of their property.

5.2 Landlord Complaint Process

If a landlord or nominated individual complains about their score or the audit process, it should be made in writing to the Operational Support Manager (OSM) at Hull University Union within ten working days of feedback being received. Upon receipt of the complaint the OSM will acknowledge it, and investigate the claims made to give a response to the complainant within ten working days.

The OSM upon investigating a complaint will make one of three outcomes:

Uphold the Complaint: Any dispute within the complaint will be rectified and the audit score adjusted accordingly.

Dismiss the Complaint: Having investigated the complaint against the evidence collected/put forward, the complaint has been dismissed and the reasons for doing so stated clearly.

Recommend A Revisit: In the event of any uncertainty, the OSM may recommend that a revisit take place by a different auditor to address any concerns made by the complainant, this is likely to be in any circumstances where the evidence collected by the auditor is not appropriate or missing. Upon the conduct of the revisit the complaint will then either be upheld or dismissed.

5.3 Tenant Complaint Process

A tenant may complain about any perceived discrepancy between the audit rating and the quality of their house. This complaint should be made to the OSM at Hull University Union. Upon receipt of the complaint the Administrator will acknowledge it, and investigate the claims made to give a response to the complainant within ten working days.

The OSM will make the landlord/managing agent aware of the complaint and may seek clarification from the landlord or tenants about the specific nature of the claims and in extreme circumstances a visit to the property to investigate any concerns that have been made may be arranged. Following the investigation, the complaint will either be upheld or dismissed. There is no appeal process for complaints from tenants.

Any complaints from tenants that do not relate to the audit of the property will be passed on to the Advice Centre at HUU.

5.4 When to Appeal

In the rare event that a landlord/managing agent is not satisfied with the outcome of a complaint, it may be escalated and heard by the appeals panel. The appeals panel will meet quarterly (only if there are appeals to be heard) in the last weeks of January, April, July and October.

5.5 Appeals Process

The appeal must be made in writing to, the Chair of the HullSTARS Appeals Panel. In order to be heard at the next panel must be made no later than 7 days before next set date of the appeals panel, which will be published on the HullSTARS website. Upon receipt of the complaint the Chair will acknowledge it in writing, and request any documentation relating to the outcome of the original complaint from the Director of Membership Services. It is the decision of the Chair, to decide if the appeal should be heard by the panel or not.

During the process of the appeal, the landlord or nominated individual can request that their score be taken down from the website. This will leave the disputed property with no accreditation rating until a decision is made by the Chair or the Appeals Panel.

If the Chair decides that the appeal has valid grounds and will be heard by the panel, the landlord/managing agent will be invited to present his/her appeal and the reasons for it at the panel hearing. The panel may also ask to hear from the property auditor, the OSM or the Director of Membership Services at the hearing. Once all evidence has been presented, the panel will reach its conclusion by a simple majority vote, where the decision will either be upheld or dismissed. The decision of the Appeals Panel will be final.

6. Referral Policy – HullSTARS and Hull City Council

6.1 Purpose

The purpose of the Referrals Policy is to improve consistency and transparency between key stakeholders in relation to the quality of student accommodation. HullSTARS will work with Hull City Council to action service requests for minor remedial works, and make referrals to the Council where appropriate

6.2 Scope

The Referrals Policy will operate between all HullSTARS staff, the Operational Support Manager (OSM), and the Private Housing (Environmental Health) Team at Hull City Council. If required HullSTARS may also seek guidance from the Senior Management Team, within Hull University Union.

6.3 Advice

HullSTARS staff may liaise with members of staff from Hull City Council regarding quality or health and safety issues to obtain advice without making a formal referral.

All instances of communication from the HullSTARS Administrator will be treated by Hull City Council as an advice request in the first instance, unless otherwise stated. In the event that the information received warrants positive action by Hull City Council, this will be confirmed to the HullSTARS Administrator.

Minimal information will be provided to Hull City Council during an advice request.

6.4 Referral Procedure

6.4.1 Referrals following audit

The bulk of referrals will be made as a result of property audits carried out by student Property Auditors at HullSTARS.

Points relating to the following may be referred to Hull City Council under the referrals policy:

- Fire safety
- Electrical safety
- Gas safety
- Sanitation and drainage
- Provision of hot water
- Room sizes and overcrowding
- Amenities provision

HullSTARS Property Auditors will conduct property audits on registered properties. If and when an issue comes to light in relation to the above points, the OSM may contact Hull City Council for advice or to make a formal referral.

HullSTARS will give the landlord of a referred property notice of the referral within 24 hours of formally referring the property to Hull City Council.

Hull City Council will inform the landlord that the referral has come through HullSTARS if requested.

Property and landlord information will be provided to Hull City Council should a formal referral be made.

6.5 Referrals from reviews

Reviews left by current student tenants, will warrant intervention from Hull City Council. Should HullSTARS encounter any review which highlights any issues as outlined in 4.a, HullSTARS may contact the student to encourage them to report the issues to Hull City Council, including for those properties that are not registered to HullSTARS.

Property and landlord information will be provided to Hull City Council should a formal referral be made.

6.6 Tenant Complaint Process

Hull City Council may refuse a referral from HullSTARS, should they feel that the issue could be dealt with by HullSTARS.

Hull City Council may use prior knowledge of a property to rule out any requirement for further investigatory action, this would be confirmed at the time of the referral, before the landlord is contacted by HullSTARS staff.

6.7 Recording of information

HullSTARS will keep a record of all formal referrals and advice requests made to Hull City Council, including but not limited to: the property address; number of bedrooms; landlords name and contact number.

6.8 Recording of outcomes

Hull City Council will inform HullSTARS of the outcome of the case, and provide a first update within 28 days of the referral being made.

6.9 Review

HullSTARS, HUU Senior Management Team and Hull City Council will review the referrals policy annually, to ensure the policy continues to be fit for purpose. Any changes or amendments to the policy will be communicated to landlords via the HullSTARS website.

HullSTARS will publish the Referral Policy on the website, www.hullstars.com for transparency.

7 HullSTARS Reported Review Policy

7.1 Purpose

The purpose of the Reported Review policy is to allow HullSTARS registered landlords the opportunity to report and challenge any review/photograph left online which is deemed to be unfair or unbalanced. HullSTARS will investigate all reports, and where necessary contact the student to confirm whether or not they feel their comments are justified and if they want to remove/amend their review. Once investigated, HullSTARS may remove or re-publish the review/photograph. It is not for HullSTARS to determine who is 'telling the truth' in any case. This does not apply to non-registered landlords.

7.2 Scope

The Reported Review Policy will operate between HullSTARS administration and the Operational Support Manager. If required HullSTARS may also seek guidance from the Senior Management Team, within Hull University Union.

Once a review has been reported, it will remain hidden from public view until the investigation is complete.

7.3 Reported Procedure

7.3.1 Once a review/photograph has been reported HullSTARS in the first instance will send an email to the named landlord acknowledging the reported review/photograph. This email will also stipulate timescales, detailing that the author will have 28 days from the date of the email to respond.

HullSTARS will then contact the author of the review, offering them the opportunity to respond within 28 days with the following options:

Republish – If they are happy that the review is a true representation of their time in the house.

Amend – If they would like to amend the wording to make it more balanced/accurate.

Delete – If they feel that it would be appropriate, to remove the review entirely.

7.3.3 Response Times

No Response within 14 days:

If no response has been received within 14 days of the original email, HullSTARS will send a second reminder email to the author, advising them they have a further 14 days to respond. HullSTARS will also update the landlord via email with the progress of their report.

Response Received within 28 Days:

If a response is received within 28 Days, HullSTARS will re-publish the review/photograph in line with the author's response, this could be the following –

- Remove
- Amend
- Re-publish with no changes

No Response Received after 28 Days:

HullSTARS will re-publish the review in its original form.

HullSTARS will then contact the reporting landlord apprising them of the outcome. HullSTARS will also advise that response/reply can be made to the review once published.

A landlord can choose to report the review for a second time, and the same procedure will be followed. However there will be no option to report a third time.

7.4 Recording of information

HullSTARS will keep a record of all reported reviews/photographs, including but not limited to: the property address; landlords name and email address, students name and email address.

7.5 Recording of outcomes

HullSTARS will update all relevant parties with the outcome of each reported review/photograph, this can be via email or letter.

7.6 Review

HullSTARS and HUU Senior Management Team will review the referrals policy annually, to ensure the policy continues to be fit for purpose. Any changes or amendments to the policy will be communicated to landlords via the HullSTARS website.

HullSTARS will publish the Reported Review Policy on the website, www.hullstars.com for transparency.

8. Code of Conduct

All HullSTARS registered landlords must behave in a manner not likely to cause harassment, alarm or distress to a student. Should your behaviour or actions be found and proven to fall below these expected standards, HullSTARS may rescind the invitation to the annual Housing Fair, or terminate membership entirely.

