



Coleraine

Londonderry

Belfast

Inventory step-changes efficiency for Ulster's dispersed estate

Developed rapidly with Occam over the last few years, Ulster is using Room Service Inventory to give students a better service and create dramatic efficiency gains.

Ulster has 2,160 beds across three sites, all in purpose built apartment blocks with 2 to 6 beds per apartment.

"We have moved so far and so fast with Room Service and Occam."

In 2016, Ulster won the THE Most Improved Student Experience award. Given its centrality to the student experience, is it reasonable to assume that accommodation played a role in that improvement?

"Definitely," says Ulster's Finance & IT Officer, Joan Christie, "we have moved so far and so fast with Room Service and Occam. It has really smoothed things out for students and for the estates teams." In no small part, Joan adds, this has been achieved by giving more control and responsibility to the students.

Ulster has a widely dispersed estate. Joan's teams oversee campuses which are between 35 and 70 miles apart, in Belfast, Coleraine and Londonderry, with a mixture of their own and private partner buildings providing both on, and off-site accommodation. Some of the off-site buildings are as much as three miles away.

Before introducing the Occam system, in person attendance for inventory checks on entry, as well as exit, took a huge amount of time. Ulster was using emailed PDFs for inventory reports but, says Joan, "it was still an essentially paper-based system, with a lot of photocopying and spreadsheet-based reconciliations at the end of the year."

Limited inspection on entry

Using Room Service Inventory, there is now limited staff inspection on entry. Instead, each student is responsible for inspecting, and then confirming online, the condition of each room and the furnishings and equipment within it. They must do this within a set period, failing which they know that any unrecorded defects will become their liability on exit (they are nagged as the deadline approaches). Reported defects and missing items are acknowledged



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“Thanks to the Staff Portal function, we can give restricted access to private sector partners.”

via Room Service, which also shows progress in fixing such issues. Each inventory is thus updated on an on-going basis, reducing surprises at the year end and cutting post-exit disputes to a fraction of what they were.

report, not up to six near-identical ones. The students, meanwhile, have the opportunity to resolve disputes about responsibility amongst themselves immediately after damage has been done, not at the year end.

Partners & other departments

Another feature of Inventory which has added value for Ulster is the ability to allow their private providers to use it, with appropriate levels of restricted access. Private providers are thus able to enjoy the same efficiency gains – and pass the resultant savings on, to Ulster.

Similarly, whilst the system of Ulster’s maintenance department is not yet integrated with Room Service, the ability of Inventory to produce up-to-date spreadsheet reports on all tasks at any time – combined with the ease with which students can report issues when they occur – has made a big difference to workflow. Maintenance tasks are much less ‘bunched’ than they were, work is effectively signed off by students when completed and, again, disputes greatly reduced. Better still, updating the status of the Inventory items (from both Tasks and Routine Inspections) allows the extraction of end-of-year reports in preparation for replacements, repainting etc. over the summer months and helps identify the blocks suitable for immediate allocation over the summer.



“Next year, student comments shared on spaces such as the kitchen will be on a common ‘noticeboard’, so we’ll see a single, aggregate report, not up to six near-identical ones.”

“Some things don’t change.” admits Joan, “Some students still often leave their accommodation in poor condition and we have to physically inspect every room.” What has changed, she says, is that any room for doubts and disagreements has been minimised. Clarity over ‘before and after’ positions brings acceptance. Better still, from next year, the main source of the few disputes which do arise (disagreement about who-did-what within shared spaces) will be reported via a shared noticeboard within Inventory. Students in each apartment will be able to report, say, damage to a kitchen door, on the noticeboard and see what others have already reported. For the estates teams, it creates a single, aggregate

Growing dialogue

Looking ahead, Joan sees continued growth in dialogue with students, partners and maintenance teams as the route to both dealing with maintenance promptly and to promoting greater care of the apartments by their student occupants. Correct minor damage in an apartment quickly, she argues, and the students will be more likely to report additional issues when they happen and, come the year end, everyone should be (even) happier.