

C A S E S T U D Y

# ULIVING@HERTFORDSHIRE: SERVICE IMPROVEMENT



■ **TOTAL PROJECT VALUE :** £215M

**SIZE OF THE CAMPUS:** 3000 STUDENT ROOMS IN 32 BUILDINGS

**RESPONSIBILITIES OF O&M:** LIFECYCLE MAINTENANCE (ROUTINE AND HEAVY), HELPDESK, SECURITY AND CLEANING

**SIZE OF THE O&M TEAM:** 40

# DRIVING UP STANDARDS IN SERVICE PERFORMANCE

## Radical improvement in accommodation services has been achieved for students at The University of Hertfordshire, through a comprehensive change management process applied by the Uliving@Hertfordshire partnership.

In 2013 a new operational team took control of student accommodation at The University of Hertfordshire's Hatfield campus. At first the transition proved challenging. Services provided fell below the standards the University was expecting. But less than two years later, a new academic year started with students greeted to a radically different, positively transformed service.

This improvement came about through a **process of change management** introduced by Fulcrum, the UK project delivery and management arm of Meridiam, which is the principal (55%) shareholder in the Uliving@Hertfordshire partnership. It was important that Fulcrum worked with the operator, who has responsibility

for all operational and maintenance activities on the site through a long-term partnership arrangement. The O&M contractor also holds the lifecycle risk for the project.

A year earlier, in 2012, Hertfordshire University had secured the funding and project delivery expertise it needed by selecting Uliving as its preferred supplier for an ambitious building programme.

The resulting Uliving@Hertfordshire partnership, with the University as client and shareholder, would design, construct and manage a complex of 21 new buildings with room to house 2,500 students on the Hatfield campus. This had been earmarked as an essential - and sizeable - first phase of the University's Estates 2020 Vision for modernising its Hatfield site. The agreement also gave the partnership responsibility for refurbishing and managing the University's existing student accommodation on the campus. In total, **an estate housing just over 3000 people would be developed and managed by Uliving@Hertfordshire for 50 years** from June 2013.

Construction was carried out in three phases, which increased the challenge for the project's operational team. The University's

existing accommodation had to be managed as new tranches of student rooms were completed and commissioned and while further building work progressed.

As the design and build side of the project got under way, the operational team took over the management of the accommodation for the Uliving partnership. It was during the August of 2013 that worrying signs of a lack of readiness for the coming student intake started to appear, says Fulcrum's Christian Stanbury: "It became apparent that the operator was unprepared and under resourced," he says.

"The project and scale of the task in managing the accommodation were set to double over the following three years. It was important that we got it right from the start, but the team on site lacked the experience and support necessary to meet the expectations of the University client. The operator was struggling to meet the significant challenges posed in delivering services to an existing student accommodation estate, which at the time was surrounded by large scale construction activities.

"The September 2013 student intake weekend was the acid test which showed the operator was unable to deliver the expected service",





Christian says. “This is the time of the academic year when a big influx of students arrives to new and unfamiliar surroundings, needing support with their accommodation and a host of other support services that go with it. It’s very important to the University that everyone arriving finds the experience a positive one, for the sake of its reputation and also because it’s a committed partner in Uliving,

which carries the demand risk of the PPP contract.

“Prior to financial close, Meridiam helped renegotiate the project and encouraged the University to invest a small amount of equity in the project. This means **we all have a shared interest in making the University’s Estates 2020 Vision a success**, in ensuring there is a high demand for rooms available at the

Hatfield campus. In this way it’s a true public-private partnership,” Christian says.

The difficulties of September 2013 prompted an immediate reaction from Uliving, its board members and senior managers of the operator. **A new leadership team was installed** on the ground, which was given additional support from Fulcrum staff to bring about the essential uplift in



## TOP MARKS FOR THE PROJECT

Hertfordshire University can now boast some of the best accommodation for students in the whole of the UK. The University’s new development on its Hatfield campus, completed in 2016, **has room for 2,500 people in its 21 residential buildings, all built with quality of living in mind.**

Residential blocks are arranged in five colleges, each of which has its own semi-private courtyard. The collegiate groups of buildings are positioned around a shared central student hub, which contains a common function room, gym and reception area.

Furthermore, the whole development has been rated **Outstanding by the Building Research Establishment’s BREEAM** method of scoring

environmental credentials. Residents are benefitting from high levels of natural light and ventilation, plus very good air quality and acoustic performance within the buildings.

The development has since been recognised with **a number of national and international awards**, including the prize for the Best Student Housing at the 2017 CUBO (College and University Business Officers) Awards. In December 2016 the accommodation was highly commended in the Student Accommodation Awards in the ‘University Halls of the Year’ category. Then, in June 2017, the project was presented with a Silver in the Partnerships Awards, which celebrate the best international public private partnership projects. Uliving@Hertfordshire won Silver in the ‘Best Operational Project’ category. ■

service delivery that was expected. Further ongoing improvements were going to be needed, however.

It was evident that performance had improved. Operational policies and procedures were better and the University reported the 2014 student intake as markedly better than the previous year. But this was still being achieved with additional support from the University and Fulcrum. By November that year satisfaction levels<sup>1)</sup> had fallen back below expectations.

It was at this point that **Fulcrum introduced an innovative change management programme**. This was delivered by an external consultant, Opsis, which has previously worked with Fulcrum to increase organisational effectiveness. The programme developed for the Uliving team was designed to embed cultural and procedural differences, which were needed **to ensure the accommodation service would perform consistently to high standards**. Activities of the programme included a series of

two-day workshops held over an 18-month period.

“Members of the team were encouraged to **think about what good performance looks like**. Their answers fed into a gap analysis, considering how the service was performing in comparison to where we wanted it to be,” Christian says.

“Every member of the supervisory team on site had to be fully engaged in the programme if it was going to work, to bring about the right collective improvement in effectiveness,” Christian says. “We presented proposals for this – a ‘road-map’ for how we could get to the desired end-point – to the managing director of the operator and the CEO of its parent company. Their buy-in was essential; ensuring we had the financial resources and commitment of leadership needed for the change programme to work. Agreement was received from the operator to fund the £25k cost of delivery.”

At ground level, **all the operational and supervisory team members attended a series of workshops and training sessions**. The enthusiasm and resulting improvement on site was clearly evident just a few months later as the Uliving team prepared for the September 2015 student intake.

The peak period for the Uliving service that year had the additional challenge of a significant increase in student numbers arriving, as a further tranche of the project’s accommodation buildings was now available. Despite more being asked of it, the service responded. Recorded improvements included shorter maintenance and helpdesk waiting times, better customer service interactions and a marked increase in investment in student experience events.

“The Dean of Students of the University expressed the view that the intake weekend was ‘the best we’ve ever had’,” Christian says. Benefits to Uliving and the project overall could also be

<sup>1)</sup>Satisfaction levels are measured through student surveys, with performance also rated from numbers of maintenance jobs completed on time and service default points accrued.



## O&M KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

An immediate reaction to the challenges at the start of the project was to develop a clear set of key performance indicators to be able to effectively track the operational performance over time.

Item Description	Before	After
Maintenance call out performance	81% (Oct 2014)	98% (Aug 2016)
Helpdesk performance	84% (Mar 2015)	97% (Sep 2016)
Customer satisfaction survey score	68% (June 2014)	76% (June 2016)
Service delivery failure points	181,250 pts (2014)	5,250 pts (2016)
Start of term satisfaction (as measured by client feedback)	Satisfactory (September 2014)	Excellent (September 2016)

counted in terms of trust and a notable rapport restored with the University's estates team. "The reputation of Uliving was given a healthy boost and so was the outlook for reduction in demand risk, as satisfaction level among students was up and occupancy levels stood at 100%. The University were able to see the positive impact of Fulcrum's proactive approach both as the client on the ground but also as a shareholder."

Chris Waters is the head of residential and property management in Hertfordshire University's Estates team. "It's certainly not easy providing accommodation and support services for up to 3,000 people. Students of over 100 different nationalities attend the University in any given year. Arguably the trickiest bit is **maintaining effective communication** between different departments; and the process gets harder when new procedures have to be added and coordinated as new phases of accommodation are added," Chris says.

Hertfordshire University, like many, has numerous different departments with direct interest in students' welfare and accommodation. These include Student Support (providing wellbeing and pastoral services), Allocations (responsible for room allocation, changes, early arrivals

and special provisions), Student Finance (collecting payments), the Students' Union and the University Estates department.

"Good management is key, particularly for **driving communications, planning and preparation across seven or eight discrete teams**. This has improved vastly. Uliving has the right people in place, focused on the essentials of how to make student living good," Chris says.

"In essence this is all about getting the basics right, such as accommodation, cleaning and maintenance, security, broadband and postal systems - making sure essential things are working. These are important so that standards can be maintained and support teams can then turn to the "nice stuff" of organising and coordinating events.

"Fulcrum brought an extra dimension to this - the additional pressure needed to lift performance. They showed a lot of passion for driving the project and setting high standards and they didn't shy away from sorting out the problems when it got really difficult. **It's great to have the support from an investor that's willing to get involved in the day to day running of the project** and put things right where it's needed." ■

## A GLOBAL VIEW ON THE END-USER'S EXPERIENCE

"It's important to **understand how students feel when living in student accommodation** and how this impacts on their overall experience at University," says Christian Stanbury. "At Fulcrum, we take a whole student journey approach, from when a student first connects with the University by providing support at Open and Visit days right through to when they graduate."



"As part of this we're **developing tools to understand the experience at every step of the journey** including pre-arrival, moving and settling in, handling stresses such as exams and other personal challenges, and moving on. This enables us to make changes whilst a student is still living with us to create student advocates who want to live on campus again and recommend us to a friend." ■



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