

# FORWARD LOOK

## 2008 - 2011

unipol

the home of student housing

# INTRODUCTION

Unipol is a unique organisation and it is vital that it continues to develop its role as a mainstream student housing charity, promoting innovation, excellence, high standards and guiding best practice within student accommodation.

This Forward Look has been focussed following a significant consultative effort involving Unipol staff and trustees. The Forward Look is both an inspirational document, outlining what Unipol hopes to achieve over the next three years, and a working document, providing detailed information about how those wider aspirations can be achieved in practical terms. A timeline matrix at the end of the document gives the likely roll out of development.

Trustees have recognised, in a recent review of governance and their own contribution to the charity, that partnership working is essential to Unipol's success and that they have a vital ambassadorial role in promoting and maintaining and seeking out opportunities for the charity in the future. This ambassadorial role includes delivering support from Unipol's stakeholders as well seeking out new opportunities where Unipol can undertake good work and improve housing conditions and choices.

Trustees have also recognised the importance of Unipol's reputation, both national and local and of the importance of building the Unipol brand in the context of a housing service and training supplier but also recognising Unipol's position as a market leader and the importance of maintaining a moral high ground as it lobbies for change and improvements.

## THE "VIRTUOUS CIRCLE" MODEL OF UNIPOL'S FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

Unipol has, over the past three years, always looked to add value to each of its operations and, over the last six years, has been moving towards a model of a "virtuous circle". The key goal of this Forward Look is to drive forward the virtuous circle model of working.

Unipol has a number of staging posts within the virtuous circle model:

- ▶ it has expanded its housing advice and information role in Leeds, Nottingham and Bradford and has built up a critical mass of operation in those three areas that allows cross-feeding of ideas and resources whilst maintaining local diversity
- ▶ this information and advice, which includes information and research about the student accommodation markets and students' needs and desires, feeds directly into Unipol's innovative role as a direct housing provider. Unipol's diverse housing operations has allowed a strong portfolio to be developed in Leeds to meet the needs of first year and returning students and those with special housing needs, particularly those with families and disabilities. This portfolio must retain its high reputation, strong lettings and low void level in order to provide ongoing resources to feed the organisation financially and ensure standards are continuously improved
- ▶ this notion of continual improvement, coupled with a track record of achieving high value housing services leads directly into Unipol's commitment to expand accreditation as a successful and proven tool, both locally and nationally, and to engage with other housing suppliers and persuade them to meet agreed benchmark standards and raise their game, improving housing standards for students and young people generally, encouraging tenant empowerment and supplier transparency

- ▶ finally, Unipol's work with others feeds into its national training mission to provide relevant "hands on" information to those working in the sector and to spread best practice, in partnership with others, including government and other agencies, who share this mission. The information and innovation that comes from training then feeds back into Unipol's housing and advice role and the circle is complete.

Within the next three years, Unipol will seek to strengthen this "virtuous circle" approach as it refines and develops new services to meet serious challenges. The circle will seek to strengthen and reinforce Unipol's operations as they meet the competition they continue to face in a tough and high quality student accommodation market.

## CONTINUAL IMPROVEMENT AND INNOVATION

This Forward Look must address issues which arise from the high levels of competition within the student housing market. In order to meet this Unipol must seek to maintain its existing services, portfolio and websites. It will only achieve this within a process of ongoing and continual improvement. This can be achieved by constantly reviewing and updating service outputs and by ensuring that property standards within the property portfolio are constantly updated and upgraded. There is no room for complacency and the effort involved in this continual improvement must not be under-estimated.

In other areas Unipol must seek to innovate, to bring new ideas to the table and to act on them. It is unlikely that Unipol will expand its housing portfolio beyond the 2,650 tenants it has at present, or that it needs or should do so.

Its main areas of innovation will switch from property development, which has seen the organisation grow over the last six years, to service outputs with better information for more students, their parents and to widen Unipol's own consumers. Unipol must reinvent and remarket its key attraction of being at the centre of the student lettings market where it operates and must seek to reinforce that position to ensure it can offer a comprehensive service and relevant to students.

In both of these areas, Unipol will need help from its many stakeholders: not only help, but support and both practical and financial assistance. There is every evidence that this support will be forthcoming and, as a relatively small organisation with an important mission, this assistance is essential.

## DEFINING THE CORE OBJECTIVES

The key drivers to improving and expanding Unipol's service role are to:

- ▶ improve communications, both virtual and actual, between Unipol and students, ensuring that advice and information is heard loudly and clearly by students and that they act on that advice to their advantage and work with students at the centre of a peer to peer communications strategy
- ▶ expand and refine the Accommodation Bureaux services for students, ensuring that ideas and practices cross-feed between Leeds, Bradford and the Nottingham arenas
- ▶ extend Unipol's role in promoting and administering accreditation to a rigorous set of auditable standards and extend the use of accreditation as a central tool in improving standards for students, the community and good landlords in partnerships with housing providers, the communities within which they work and local authorities

- ▶ expand the charity's training, advice and lobbying and widen the service areas offered by the charity to stakeholders, friends and supporters, without diluting core values, as part of widening the charity's service areas and raising Unipol's national profile as the major student housing resource within England and Wales
- ▶ maintain the vital Leeds base as a housing provider by producing innovation, reflecting good practice, placing a priority on special needs housing and taking calculated risks investing in the Charity's future development as a housing owner and manager
- ▶ reflect the new values of sustainability in the charity's day to day and future operations
- ▶ strengthen the role of trustees within a wider skills base for the Board, improve human resources and the training of staff and increase the capacity of the charity's management so that all can respond and react to change and innovation.

## DELIVERING ON THE CORE OBJECTIVES: DETAILED PLANS AND TARGETS

**Improve communications, both virtual and actual, between Unipol and students, ensuring that advice and information is heard loudly and clearly by students and that they act on that advice to their advantage and work with students at the centre of a peer to peer communications strategy**

To keep the Unipol websites as major house hunting sites in England and Wales by keeping them fresh and up to date and to:

- ▶ *encourage social networking in a house hunting context by linking into specialist pages on Facebook and establish a student blog site on housing issues to ensure minimum feed of entries using students themselves to inform and assist each other in housing related issues*
- ▶ *maintain and increase usage of the Unipol websites by students following greater promotion through stakeholders as the key central resource for house hunting for their students*
- ▶ *undertake a review of links on stakeholders websites of links to the Unipol site and enhance those references at key times of the year*
- ▶ *ensure that feedback from consumers is encouraged, analysed and acted upon annually*
- ▶ *develop a dedicated news headline page for the websites that present housing and other related news in an attractive "front page" style*
- ▶ *insert moving images into the Unipol web site using short videos stressing Unipol's role as adviser and housing supplier so that these can be streamed easily*
- ▶ *establish links with student lifestyle sites on a reciprocal basis to build interest and relevance of the website*
- ▶ *increase Unipol's profile on linking with other key websites such as BBC, YouGov and NUS.*

Establish more up to date web based information by integrating paper based and electronic information more effectively and having a core member of staff take responsibility for web content at the hub of designated correspondents who feed in up to

date copy.

Expand the already successful tabloid newspapers that are delivered direct to key postal districts in Bradford, Leeds and Nottingham and increase the advertising content to make these economically sustainable and to work with or partners to use these to deliver wider information produce by them.

Extend the flat screen information to smaller colleges and students unions and ensure that flat screen information is updated regularly.

Maintain and enhance the range of publications in a process of constant redesign.

Improve communications with Unipol's tenants especially in areas of service delivery: safety, security, repairs and messages by the use of text messaging and use electronic communication with tenants more efficiently and to build brand loyalty.

### **Expand and refine the Accommodation Bureaux services for students, ensuring that ideas and practices cross-feed between Leeds, Bradford and the Nottingham arenas**

Develop a new workstation at the University of Bradford in the Student Hub office and place a terminal in Bradford College together with an attractive display of Unipol's role.

Establish and, if required, relocate the Nottingham University Office after the two year initial lease period in 2009 and develop a smaller terminal facility at Nottingham Trent Students Union.

To continue to develop and expand the Bureau Services in the City of Nottingham to serve all the students in that city and to ensure that Nottingham Trent University pays a full part in that process by November 2008 and to:

- ▶ *become the centre of the student letting market and to convince others of the value of consistency, accuracy, choice, transparency and honesty in that market*
- ▶ *work closely with the students' unions in establishing peer to peer communications*
- ▶ *seek to be an ally to community groups who welcome students and the diversity they bring to the community and to acknowledge and work on behalf of the entire community to ensure that tolerance, politeness and appreciation of differing lifestyles are maintained or re-established.*

In all of the bureaux and on the websites to:

- ▶ *develop a new area of the website for parents of undergraduates*
- ▶ *install house hunting blogs*
- ▶ *improve information for students studying abroad*
- ▶ *develop a short terms lettings service*
- ▶ *develop a stripped down version of property searches and clipboard for use on mobile phones*
- ▶ *develop cut down versions of checklists and advice for use on mobiles*
- ▶ *implement more mapping options with link to Google Maps (showing pin board of results, directions to properties and use of aerial photographs)*
- ▶ *provide mobile cut down versions of house hunting advice and searches*
- ▶ *increase the use of photos particularly internal photos*
- ▶ *maintain the Unipol Professionals site as an added value to users of Unipol's main sites as long as such added value is cost effective*

To obtain a customer service quality mark for advice services in Leeds, Bradford and Nottingham.

To undertake a review with the outcome of developing a more flexible pricing system to encourage greater use of Unipol's Bureau Services by more managing agents.

To relaunch the Unipol Leeds site to new owners and those not using Unipol's services in November 2008 for the 2008-2009 house hunting season with the full support and assistance of key stakeholders.

To secure adequate funding to maintain and develop the Leeds service from the Principal Members after the current funding tranche expires in August 2009 and to ensue continued funding of the Nottingham site from August 1st 2010.

To maintain an annual co-ordinated but flexible house hunting strategy in Leeds, Bradford and Nottingham, working closely with all stakeholders but particularly the students' unions and to improve Unipol's joint working with the smaller, more distinctive colleges in Leeds, Bradford and Nottingham and to fully extend Unipol's services to Leeds Trinity by 2009.

To co-operate with any Rate Your Landlord campaign that has the support of all stakeholders.

To establish a larger suppliers private sector liaison Group in Leeds, Bradford and Nottingham.

To undertake an annual market briefing and four owners' newsletters which are put on the web.

**Extend Unipol's role in promoting and administering accreditation to a rigorous set of auditable standards and extending the use of accreditation as a central tool in improving standards for students, the community and good landlords in partnerships with housing providers, the communities within which they work and local authorities**

Complete its review of the previous Greater Nottingham Accreditation Scheme and revitalise accreditation in Nottingham with a new Unipol/DASH partnership from August 2008 with 75% participation ensuring that those owners who are willing to maintain high standards and accountability are rewarded by good lettings.

Follow through the Nottingham review with a review of the Leeds and Bradford Codes and reassert the role of the Unipol Code as being the only Code students should look for when renting from the private sector that meets their specialised needs, seeking the support of stakeholders and Leeds City Council for this position and redesign and rebrand the Codes in Leeds and Bradford.

In Leeds, Bradford and Nottingham to extend accreditation to managing agents through the introduction of a Code "supporter" status involving rolling out accreditation to their property owners and by signing a Protocol to make that commitment transparent.

Work closely with national and regional Government and maintain our strategic relationship with the National Union of Students and those interested in promoting genuine and auditable accreditation to:

- ▶ *maintain the ANUK/Unipol National Codes of Standards for larger student developments as the brand leaders for quality, fairness and accountability and ensure close ownership by NUS in their continued development and*
- ▶ *drive forward the innovative assessment and verification system and promote best practice from its outputs*
- ▶ *review that National Code for Educational Establishments and launch it and follow through the launch with a new audit and appraisal system*
- ▶ *widen awareness of the National Code by a national advertising campaign*
- ▶ *establish a Home Office approved security standard for larger (and if possible) for smaller accredited buildings*

#### Within the Local Unipol Codes of Standards to:

- ▶ *maintain and increase funding and closer links with Leeds City Council and Bradford Council*
- ▶ *increase inspections and verification processes for Code properties in order to build quality and consistency*
- ▶ *establish a platinum owners category where no upheld complains for five years*
- ▶ *establish a number of sustainability and community-related criteria within the Code.*

As part of Unipol's wider role in promoting accreditation to seek to develop an audit system designed to ensure that all accreditation schemes meet the four core values of declaration, verification, continual self improvement and a Dispute Resolution or Tribunal System and seek to have the Government approve those four core values and work closely with other partners and the Local Government Association to establish the audit system as part of a National Approved Code under the Housing Act 2004.

Widen out Unipol's charitable objectives to allow it to promote, develop, administer and publicise such a scheme for accreditation generally, involving all schemes not just those related to students with a view to placing Unipol at the centre of the wider accreditation movement in England and Wales.

**Expand the charity's training, advice and lobbying and widen the service areas offered by the charity to stakeholders, friends and supporters, without diluting core values, as part of widening the charity's service areas and raising Unipol's national profile as the major student housing resource within England and Wales**

Unipol's quest to identify, share and initiate good practice is at the centre of its developmental and dissemination role through training and conferences and, with a significant investment on an in-house training facility, Unipol will increase its output in this area to:

- ▶ *continue to provide affordable training for all those in the sector*
- ▶ *build upon Unipol's relationships with its training partners, particularly NUS, CLG and the Home Office*
- ▶ *establish a Training Advisory Group to assist it is defining priorities that will meet annually*
- ▶ *allow downloading of conference papers on line*
- ▶ *undertake a Yorkshire Landlords Day training event with the RLA*

- ▶ undertake a major national bi-annual (every 2 years) event for the whole sector.
- ▶ complete the building of a Board Room Annex that can also be used as a small conference facility in Leeds for use by Unipol, stakeholders and the community as a low cost and attractive in-house facility
- ▶ increase owner training and skills based courses in co-operation with students' unions, DASH and LCC
- ▶ generate sufficient resources to turn Unipol's advice and information system into a national core system for students and staff working in student accommodation linked into Unipol's training role and strategic partnership with NUS
- ▶ improve training for its own student wardens and reception services
- ▶ use the National Codes as a springboard for in-house training for larger suppliers
- ▶ maintain central sponsorship of the training operation in a two year exclusive arrangement from 2008-2010.

Unipol will also see to widen out its service areas to stakeholders, and others, as part of moving towards its mission of being a major student housing resource and will:

- ▶ maintain the charity's national links on housing policy formation.
- ▶ respond positively to approaches from possible new partners to providing a range of housing advice services to new areas of the country and build on existing links with London Metropolitan University and the London School of Economics to build closer relationships in these areas as part of the package of services Unipol provides them through the Netlet arrangements.
- ▶ maintain the strategic link Unipol has with the National Union of Students and build links with key students' unions and their staff in the important national areas of crime prevention, sustainability, standards and community and to raise funding, where appropriate, for activities in those areas.
- ▶ work with NUS to initiate innovative housing schemes for student accommodation including the use of student housing co-operatives and their encouragement in appropriate locations.

In Leeds, Nottingham and Bradford, Unipol will:

- ▶ seek to extend, subject to resources and support being available from stakeholders, tenancy support services and peer-to-peer mediation to the private sector providing information and support for both landlords and their tenants to improve the student experience when difficulties occur.
- ▶ undertake a number of initiatives to publicise and raise awareness of the need for students to be considerate towards other residents' needs.
- ▶ play a full part in the Crime Reduction Partnerships.

**Maintain the vital Leeds base as a housing provider by producing innovation and reflecting good practice and taking calculated risks investing in the Charity's future development as a housing owner and manager**

### **Ongoing Service Delivery**

To be aware of the risks inherent in letting properties into an overstocked and competitive market and respond to those risks by maintaining:

- enthusiasm, commitment and responsiveness in the letting market

- *undertaking accompanied viewings and providing transport for them*
- *establishing set targets for lettings and monitoring these closely*
- *maintaining a member of staff with an overview of lettings*
- *building brand loyalty*
- *maintaining and retaining Unipol's existing customer base.*

To continually review the portfolio to meet the needs of its student consumers and offers choice, value for money and affordability, undertaking an annual survey to measure customer satisfaction and acting on those results where strengths and weaknesses are identified.

### **Special Housing Needs**

To expand family, student couples and postgraduate housing by:

- ▶ *completing the refit of Shay Street/Holborn Terrace for 56 families by April 2009*
- ▶ *putting together a bid with Connect Housing and the Housing Corporation for the redevelopment and expansion (by rationalising some existing Unipol units) of off-street property housing for students with families in partnership with Leeds City Council with works commencing in Summer 2009 and ending a year later and to building in a sustainability element into this small house programme*
- ▶ *determining the future of Woodsley Terrace (providing housing for 32 families) after 2010 with the University of Leeds in partnership with Home Housing Association and developing two additional studio flats and obtaining grant aid for upgrading the development*
- ▶ *altering the leasing arrangements for Argies Phase I and II and Greyson Heights to reflect recent Housing Corporation priorities with a view to meeting regulatory requirements within a best VAT fit structure*
- ▶ *initiating discussions with Nottingham City Council and the University of Nottingham about the possibility of developing some family housing within Nottingham for their students*
- ▶ *increasing the amount of accommodation it can offer to students with disability based on the principle that such students should, wherever possible, be able to make the same choices in housing as all other students*
- ▶ *build on experiences from the pilot Vine Project and seek to maintain future involvement in that project*
- ▶ *acquire a number of suitable off-street properties, ideally one a year starting in 2009, that can be fully converted for ambulatory disabled use.*

### **Student Complexes**

To determine the future of Cardigan Road Flats by November 2008 with the aim being to refurbish this small complex whilst maintaining affordable rents to provide students from Leeds Metropolitan University with a low cost option within their allocated portfolio for their first year students.

Respond to needs of Unipol's stakeholders by developing on line applications with them and offer an on line booking facility in Unipol's complexes.

Extend Unipol's existing underwrite agreements which expire in 2009 for New York Buildings and Alexander Court with Leeds Metropolitan University for use by their first year students.

To improve security and security awareness at Unipol's complexes by expanding the out of hours enquiries in the Mill Street reception, increasing the Securitas presence at developments and utilising a mobile unit to expand the service and improving the out of hours service to tenants and responding to emergencies more quickly.

Continuing with the introductory tenant socials and seeking to extend them to other events throughout the year in particular by the organisation of an annual community rented "family fun day" at one of the student family complexes and by organising end of year bar-b-ques at developments which will emphasise future brand identity and loyalty building on a pilot event held in 2007.

Refreshing the Existing Property Stock

To fully implement the standards required by of the Housing Act and the independent Housing Health and Safety Ratings System assessments throughout the portfolio.

Trial a diagnostic repair reporting system and, if successful, to extend it to cover the portfolio.

To make best use and refresh the existing stock by:

- *continuing to switch to 4' and double beds*
- *examine the possibility of fitting room safes in smaller complexes*
- *maintain a consistent improvement of furniture and fittings*
- *expand fridge/freezer capacity in all flats housing 5 students and above*
- *continue the roll out of web services at New York Buildings in 2008-9 and in Cardigan Road (if refurbished) in 2009-2010*
- *improve internet delivery for students in smaller properties.*

Use Unipol's sinking funds prudently to maintain stylish student housing that reflects both quality and affordability.

Develop a limited short stay accommodation provision over the summer for conference and visitors.

Undertake more efficient and targeted inspection of Unipol properties with the introduction of new inspection routines.

Improve transparency in lettings by putting room plans on the web of Unipol's houses and rooms by 2009, increase the use of up-to-date photographs and issue four tenants' newsletters a year.

Maintain a sustainable purchase of properties that can fulfil Unipol's mission of providing high quality student housing whilst continuing to build a flexible reserves and asset base.

Speed up deposit returns to 14 days from the end of the tenancy in line with the changes required by the Tenancy Deposit Protection system in summer 2008.

Meet the need to have Energy Performance Certificates for Unipol's portfolio by January 2009 and enable tenants to have access to this information on the web as part of the marketing of properties from October 2008.

#### ***Housing Management for Smaller Off-Street Houses***

To continue to expand Unipol's property management to 100 properties, with 40% of these on three year management agreements.

To improve letting techniques whilst mitigating direct letting risk by re-engineering an attractive managed property portfolio.

### **Finance**

Carry out a review of Unipol's rent collection system in 2008, implementing any changes with effect from July 2009 whilst maintaining a fair rent collection policy.

Introduce an on-line payment option for tenants using FuturePay in 2008.

Improve the understanding of financial procedures by housing management staff.

Make smarter use of Unipol's money through better banking arrangements.

Bulk purchase energy for larger complexes at more competitive rates.

### **Reflect the new values of sustainability in the charity's day to day and future operations**

To carry out a sustainability review in 2008 of the whole organisation and implement change with a view to drawing up a sustainability policy for both Unipol and its tenants for 2009 which will include:

- ▶ *increasing electronic communications and reducing the user of paper in favour of e-mail and text communications*
- ▶ *using recycled paper in all of Unipol's publications*
- ▶ *extending recycling at all of Unipol's complexes and informing tenants of how these systems work*
- ▶ *responding to the needs of green pioneers by providing in-kitchen sorting for recycling*
- ▶ *providing further information about the cost of energy with simpler instructions of how to use heating systems leading to less energy usage and lower costs for tenants*
- ▶ *extending the use of low energy lighting throughout the portfolio by 2011 with a year on year roll out from 2008.*

### **Strengthen the role of trustees within a wider skills base for the Board, improve human resources and the training of staff and increase the capacity of the charity's management so that all can respond and react to change and innovation.**

Deliver on the outputs from the Review of Governance in 2007-2008 and in particular:

- ▶ *recruit new members to the Board in line with already identified skills needs*
- ▶ *undertake self appraisal of Board members and their attendance at, and full involvement in the work of the charity*
- ▶ *ensure that full attention is paid to trustee induction following the procedures already established to ensure that all trustees are fully involved in the charity's work*
- ▶ *ensure the new Finance Sub Committee fulfils its brief at the centre of accountability for Unipol's financial systems and outputs*
- ▶ *undertaking a cull of unnecessary red tape and reporting to ensure that Unipol's Board*

*concentrates on what it really needs to*

- ▶ *building on an ambassadorial role for trustees and supporters*
- ▶ *hold an annual reception for Members in Leeds annually.*

**Give added prominence to the view that human resources form the springboard for organisation's development and flexibility and to:**

- ▶ *improve staff training and induction and tighten probationary review procedures*
- ▶ *ensure that staff understand the student financial regime and its stresses*
- ▶ *initiate a staff e-letter once a month*
- ▶ *ensure that all staff see all of Unipol's operations*
- ▶ *developing the roles of the Tenancy Support Officer, Projects Co-ordinator and the Information and Communications Technology Officer and ensure that their networking opportunities and support to the organisation expand.*

**Continue to build management capacity and capability into a revised, refocused and enlarged Senior Management Team and give them a wider role in initiating change and interacting with trustees and supporters.**

## CONCLUSION

**This programme of development, change and renewal is ambitious and will need to be carried out within an environment of fast change and increasing competition. It is vital that Unipol achieves on-going change to:**

- ▶ *thrive and survive in a competitive and overstocked property market by being both a housing provider and supplier of information of choice and offering a distinctive alternative to other services*
- ▶ *maintain a pattern of stability in its housing stock with enhancing standards in all areas*
- ▶ *seek to maintain and expand the choice and range of its own accommodation provision*
- ▶ *enhance its existing range of partnerships with other service providers and investors in a not-for-profit context*
- ▶ *improve the usage of both its Accommodation Bureaux services and ensure that its advice is heeded*
- ▶ *identify areas where services can be refocused or where resources can be best used elsewhere and test critically all operational areas on a regular basis to highlight ineffective areas of operation*
- ▶ *and, against this background of stability, to expand around the following initiatives:*
  - *communicate better with service users and tenants*
  - *seek to be a role model and promoter of good practice throughout the national student accommodation arena*
  - *build on the strong relationship with stakeholders to press forward peer to peer communication and to tackle issues relating to crime and safety, sustainability and sustainable communities*
  - *increase loyalty to the Unipol brand*
  - *develop further the training role and become recognised as a national centre for information and lobbying for what is best in student housing.*