

# SFS's position:

## Students' housing situation

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responsible: Linn Svärd  
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# Students' housing situation

## 1. Introduction

This position is an opinion document subordinate to the Programme of Principles of Sweden's National Union of Students (SFS), with the aim of clarifying SFS's opinions in specific issues. The standpoint shall constitute guidance for SFS's elected representatives and office. SFS's position: Students' housing situation presents SFS's opinions surrounding students' accommodation. Unless indicated otherwise, in the document "student" refers to students within education at first-cycle as well as postgraduate students.

## 2. Prerequisites for housing

All students should have access to secure forms of housing during their period of study. The student population is not homogeneous, and their needs should consequently be met similarly to those of other citizens of society, both in relation to forms of housing and service in the residential area. SFS considers that the national government, regions and municipalities should have joint responsibility for the housing supply in Sweden, which is facilitated through communication with the institutions of higher education.

### 2.1 The right to housing

Access to housing is a social right. The housing shortage is a major social problem that has a particularly severe impact on groups that are economically weak and vulnerable in other ways. The housing shortage has a considerable impact on students as a group and has an adverse effect on both their health and their ability to cope with their studies. The housing shortage also makes many people hesitate before studying in a particular location, which contributes to an increasingly lopsided recruitment to the country's educational programmes.

SFS views the housing shortage for Sweden's students as a problem that is linked to a general housing shortage for Sweden's citizens, as a result of construction not matching population growth and society's needs. SFS feels that the government should take responsibility that all groups in society must be able to have access to good housing. It is clear that national government, region and municipality need to share responsibility for creating a satisfactory housing situation for the country's students.

### 2.2 Housing for students or student housing?

As the student population is a heterogeneous group, there are a range of needs. Students' needs must be met in the same way as those of other members of society. For that reason,

one very important basic premise is that student housing should not be subject to lower requirements in terms of standards than housing for the rest of the population.

Students are one of the groups that are hardest hit by a housing shortage, since students generally have stretched finances and are often forced to move to new locations to study. Many students are young, and have therefore not had the chance to spend a long time on waiting lists for housing. Therefore, in a housing shortage situation, it is important that housing is dedicated for students, where students can stay throughout their study period.

## 2.3 Living neighbourhoods

It is very important that students should have the same good access to social services, such as healthcare, schools and social care, as other people. This also means that there must be satisfactory infrastructure and planning to provide the necessary facilities for buying food and everyday necessities. Access to recreation, such as parks and spaces for leisure activities, must also be provided. Students form part of the community and housing for students should therefore not be concentrated in particular areas.

## 2.4 Whose responsibility?

SFS considers that national government, regions and municipalities should have joint responsibility for the housing supply in Sweden. It must be the national government's responsibility that questions concerning housing provision are taken seriously and to create the conditions to avoid housing shortages in the country. For that reason, national government should clarify the requirements set for regions and municipalities, and devise economic conditions for housing construction that will benefit society as a whole. The national government should also set clear national targets for construction of housing and work to ensure that they are met. Another important aspect of national government's promotion of new housing construction is an active land policy. This means that national government must grant land to construct housing if the land is suitable for housing.

SFS considers that the municipalities' responsibility to provide housing must be followed up by the government. There is also a need for clearer requirements to be imposed on municipalities when it comes to planning the use of land. The municipalities' exclusive right to determine how the land in the municipality shall be utilised, the so-called planning monopoly, makes their actions of key importance in establishing the conditions for housing supply. The municipalities, in exactly the same way as national government, must assume full responsibility for pursuing an active land policy and planning for the construction of housing for the entire population of the municipality. For example, the municipalities should earmark land for rental apartments. The municipalities must also take responsibility for housing provision through the non-profit housing companies over which they have an influence.

Regions too must take responsibility and SFS would like the government to set clearer requirements at this level. The municipalities that have higher education institutions within their borders are not the only ones that must take responsibility for ensuring that

there is housing for students. Surrounding municipalities must also take responsibility for the housing supply. For that reason, national government must also impose clear requirements on regions and follow up those requirements.

Higher education institutions must be responsible for maintaining fruitful dialogue with municipality and region on how the student population is expected to develop, and also endeavour to ensure that the municipality provides students with housing. The higher education institutions also have a responsibility to provide information about the housing situation in the place or places where they are located and ensure that the information provides their prospective and existing students with an accurate view of the situation.

However, the higher education institutions shall not be responsible for providing their students with accommodation by acting as housing agents or housing managers. Nevertheless, the higher education institutions must accept their responsibilities and ensure that housing is provided for the international students who are entitled, by agreement, to be provided with accommodation in Sweden.

## 3. Housing

This section describes the SFS vision of satisfactory student housing.

### 3.1 Varying housing choices

The student population is very diverse, and therefore the need for housing varies depending on which student is being referred to. For example, some students want to live with others in shared accommodation or on a corridor, whereas other students want to live alone. Students with children, who often need larger apartments, form a group with special accommodation needs. It is important that the range of housing on offer should suit the diversity of the student population with various forms of housing. SFS therefore encourages the housing companies to provide housing with different types of accommodation. Few students can afford to buy housing. It is therefore important that municipal housing is not converted into tenant-owner apartments, because it reduces the supply of housing for students to rent.

### 3.2 Housing agencies and housing waiting lists

The housing market can be confusing, and it can be difficult for a student who has recently moved to an area to know which housing companies operate in there. It must be clear for students who move to a municipality or geographic region which housing options are available and how the process of looking for accommodation functions. It is important that all students should be treated equally on waiting lists for housing. However, specific rules may be devised for students with children, since they are often in a particularly vulnerable position.

### 3.3 Reasonable rents

A student should be able to study full-time supported by just the student loan and grant. Rent that students can afford is key to their ability to carry on studies. For that reason, one of SFS's basic premises is that rent should not exceed 35 per cent of a student's income in the form of student finance. One of the reasons why SFS also opposes the introduction of market rents is that it feels that they would not be beneficial to students. It is also important that the housing companies' income requirements for tenants are reasonable and tailored to students' circumstances.

### 3.4. Housing guarantee

In some places, what is usually called a housing guarantee is in place for students, which means that students are guaranteed accommodation within a certain period, sometimes in combination with the student having to meet certain criteria. SFS perceives that the housing guarantee can fulfil a function in situations when there is a major shortage of housing, if the housing supplied maintains a good quality and standard. Many higher education institutions and study locations use the promise of housing during studies as a way of marketing themselves, and it is important that this does not send out the wrong signals to students. In order to comply with the SFS definition of a housing guarantee, accommodation must be available for all students at a higher education institution within 30 days from the start of their course and throughout their study period. There must be good public transport to and from the higher education institution, and the rent must be no higher than 35 percent of the study loan and grant. The housing must otherwise fulfil the requirements set out in laws and statutes in terms of standards and accessibility.

One risk with housing guarantees is that, instead of taking responsibility for resolving the housing shortage for all citizens, municipalities instead try to resolve the housing shortage for students through the introduction of a housing guarantee. SFS does not perceive a housing guarantee for students as a long-term solution, but rather considers that housing shortages in society as a whole must be resolved.

### 3.5 Accommodation allowance

As housing costs are different for different students, a housing allowance can be needed so that the rent for the accommodation is not too large a proportion of a student's income. SFS considers that the housing allowance must be configured in a way to ensure that it is a real alternative for everybody who needs it. It is therefore important that the housing allowance is adapted to different housing and living situations, and that the regulations are clear.

### 3.6 Secure sub-letting

Sub-letting can play an important role as a complement to the ordinary rental market when a student needs to study or carry out work practice for a short time in another

location. SFS considers that safe and legally secure conditions must be in place for tenants who sub-let. People must not be forced to live in insecure circumstances and pay unreasonable rents in order to have somewhere to live. In order to increase security for tenants, there must be a requirement specifying that a contract must always be signed. SFS considers that municipalities or geographic areas must assume responsibility for ensuring that sub-letting agencies exist.

### 3.7 Compulsory course elements in another location

Some programmes, such as teacher training and healthcare, may include compulsory work practice where a student is posted at a location that is too distant for commuting to and from their place of study. SFS believes that no-one should be forced to pay double housing costs to be able to benefit from their course. Higher education institutions should be responsible for providing accommodation if they are unable to offer a work practice place within reasonable commuting distance from the place of study.

### 3.8 International students

International students are a particularly vulnerable group as it can be difficult for them to understand how the Swedish housing market works. There may also be language barriers. It is important that the higher education institutions provide prospective students with information in their marketing about the situation in the local housing market. Higher education institution should also help international students to look for housing. Many higher education institutions commit themselves to providing housing for international students through agreements. In cases where higher education institutions have committed themselves to providing housing, they are responsible for ensuring that the housing is available. Higher education institutions cannot transfer that responsibility to student union bodies or other student-managed organisations.

### 3.9 Maintenance of existing housing

In times of widespread housing shortage, there is a risk that maintenance of housing will be neglected when people are happy simply to find somewhere to live. A satisfactory standard of housing is important for students' welfare and to enable them to complete their studies. SFS considers that the same rules and taxes should apply to maintenance, regardless of whether it relates to a tenant-owner's apartment, a rental apartment or a detached house.

## 4. Construction

This section describes the SFS view on construction of housing. The need for new housing is constantly on the agenda in order to combat and prevent housing shortages. In addition to the construction of new buildings intended for housing, opportunities to convert existing buildings, originally designed for other purposes, to housing should be reviewed.

It is important for all conversion and new construction work to be carried out with a clear focus on sustainability. It must be sustainable in social, economic and ecological terms.

## 4.1 Accessibility and standards

The student population is not a homogeneous group, but consists of different people with varying circumstances and situations in life. This means that the housing built must be of such a standard and meet accessibility requirements so that anyone can live in and visit it.

Housing for students should be adapted for accessibility so that all students, regardless of any disability, can have somewhere to live. Even those who do not themselves need housing with access for the functionally impaired may wish to receive visits from people who need it. Students have the same needs and prerequisites as everyone else and cannot be expected to live in worse conditions than others just because they are students. Housing for students must therefore meet the same requirements in terms of standards as other housing.

In some cases, the regulatory framework and requirements for housing constitute a barrier to building housing. SFS is of the opinion that it may be useful to continuously review whether some rules may be eased or reworded without any deterioration in living conditions in the housing. However, this does not apply to the requirement that apartments should be accessible by everyone. Fundamental to such a review is that it should apply to all housing, students should not be treated differently in the changes proposed.

## 4.2 Prerequisites for construction

### 4.2.1 Public utility

The municipally-owned housing companies are usually referred to as the public housing sector. They fulfil a specific role in providing housing for the municipality's inhabitants, including students, and thus also have a social responsibility. SFS considers it extremely important that municipal housing companies should assume specific responsibility for the construction of housing and for ensuring that the sell-off of housing in the public housing sector does not take place. Clear owner directives from the municipality are required in order to make this possible.

### 4.2.2 Investment support

SFS takes a favourable view of investment support for building smaller rental apartments. Smaller rental apartments play an important role in society and should therefore be prioritised. The investment support must be designed so as to be long-term and predictable, and create incentives for the construction of more inexpensive rental



apartments and housing for students. It must also be linked to requirements for lower rents.

#### 4.2.3 Taxation of housing

SFS considers that the overall taxation of housing should be neutral in relation to the form of tenure. Rental apartments must be taxed more severely than other forms of tenure as it results in the a lower value for rental apartments and a deterioration in the possibilities to construct rental apartments.

#### 4.2.4 The planning process

The process of testing whether a proposal to use land is suitable is called the planning process. It is important to strive for a good balance between citizens' ability to influence the planning process and society's need for an efficient process. SFS considers that the planning process should be reviewed to ascertain whether it is possible to shorten the time between decision and construction start. However, this must be done without jeopardising the democratic process.

#### 4.2.5 Implementation period

Municipalities must establish implementation time limits for the adoption of the detailed plan and granting of development rights. Not granting an unnecessarily long implementation period is an important tool for putting pressure on construction companies to actually build on designated land, and is also a way of taking responsibility for ensuring that long lead times are avoided.

#### 4.2.6 Provisional planning permission

In order to meet the urgent need for housing, SFS takes a cautiously favourable view of construction of housing under provisional planning permission. The use of provisional planning permission must not be seen as a permanent solution to housing shortages, but as a necessary alternative until enough permanent housing has been built. It is also extremely important that housing under temporary permits should maintain the same standards as permanent housing. Temporary building permits must only be granted on land that is already subject to a detailed plan. Rental conditions for housing under a temporary building permit must be clear and must provide security for tenants.