

# Accommodation Focus Groups

## Introduction

Following an action point arising from Estates Committee, three focus groups were held with a variety of students to talk about their experience with University campus accommodation. This was about the actual accommodation itself, rather than the accommodation office service.

The groups were held in May and results were broadly consistent. Participants were taken through a journey from pre-entry to occupation and were asked their opinion on the following areas

- Pre-Arrival
  - Open days, and research
- Move in, first impressions
- Ranking of courts
- Making friends
- Living in accommodation
  - Noise
  - Utilities
  - Decoration / Aesthetic
  - Comfort
  - Facilities
- Comparison with other accommodation in UK and abroad

## Summary & Recommendations

Overall, students had a very positive opinion of University accommodation and this report must be read in that light. The human aspect of accommodation from both the Accommodation Office staff and Estates staff is a very positive factor and it can be noted that staff are delivering great customer service overall according to these focus groups.

The dissatisfaction that arises comes from the historical design of accommodation, changing trends and cost savings.

Key points to note are as follows

- Kitchens that cannot accommodate all those that use it are a source of dissatisfaction. **Cathedral Court is particularly bad**
- Students living in a flat or floor with 8,10 or 12 rooms expect a kitchen that can hold 8,10 or 12 students.
- Where the initial view of accommodation is 'spacious' as students spend more time in their accommodation they find it harder to live in a small space. **More storage space, and better designed storage is needed**
- Interior design of accommodation has been low priority, and by **investing in better interiors, with better design, will result in a key selling point for University Accommodation over competing Universities**
- Heating and ventilation needs a complete rethink. Nearly all students are either too hot or too cold in their rooms. The heating controls are inadequate and the window restrictors prevent adequate ventilation. **It is likely that a great deal of energy is being wasted in rooms where students cannot turn off their heating.**
- Kitchen appliances both large and small, as well as the mattresses are of poor quality and fail regularly. **Better mattresses should be considered, or the option of an upgrade**
- Although the appliances fail regularly, this is not a source of dissatisfaction as the maintenance team do a good job in replacing broken items. It should be evaluated if the strategy of 'buy cheap, buy twice' is cost effective as opposed to equipping kitchens with commercial grade equipment that will not require so much maintenance.

## Pre-Arrival

Not all students attend the University Open-Days, particularly students travelling from overseas, and therefore not all students were able to view accommodation before arrival. For those who did attend an open day, the accommodation visit was not deemed that important (this is however in contrast to the open day surveys taken at the time, which suggests *in retrospect* the accommodation visit is not so important). Accommodation is seen as a basic hurdle for entry, and therefore applicants merely seek confirmation that there is appropriate accommodation and they have access to it.

**The tour videos on the accommodation website were viewed by all participants, and these are very important for the selection of accommodation.**

## First Impression

Participants were asked about their first impressions when they moved in to their room (not about the move in process itself).

Responses here were mostly positive, with participants remarking on the room being larger/brighter/nicer than they expected. They were some negative comments about the interior decoration, and that the rooms looked very outdated

Most were concerned about making friends and meeting those who were living in the same flat.

**The pressure and fear of making friends was the number one concern, and almost all attempted to make contact with others on social media prior to moving in.**

## Ranking

The groups were asked to rank various aspects of student life, from what they were most anxious about, to what they were most comfortable about at the time when they first moved in.

Participants were **most anxious about**

- Making Friends
- Accommodation (living on their own)
- Finance
- Activities
- Their course

They were **least anxious about**

- Exams
- Ability to study
- Time for studying

Making friends was a common anxiety with all participants

## **The Living Experience**

The groups were asked about various aspects of living in accommodation.

Noise was not quoted as an issue, with the exception of those living in Stag Hill court.

The rooms were regarded as clean and comfortable, however there is underlying problem with quality of fixtures, fittings and small appliances. The mattresses were regarded as 'cheap' and that they did not last an entire semester as they wore out, those who did not object to the mattress still regarded them as 'ok, not great'.

All participants had reported a fault using the self-service system and the groups were unanimously satisfied with the maintenance service received. There was no real perception as to how long the report would be fixed, however all though the response time was quick.

The heating and ventilation causes much dissatisfaction with all participants. The radiator valves are confusing and non-standard, the heating sometimes cannot be fully turned off when it is hot, or turned on when it is cold. The window restrictors add to this dissatisfaction as there is insufficient ventilation when the room is hot.

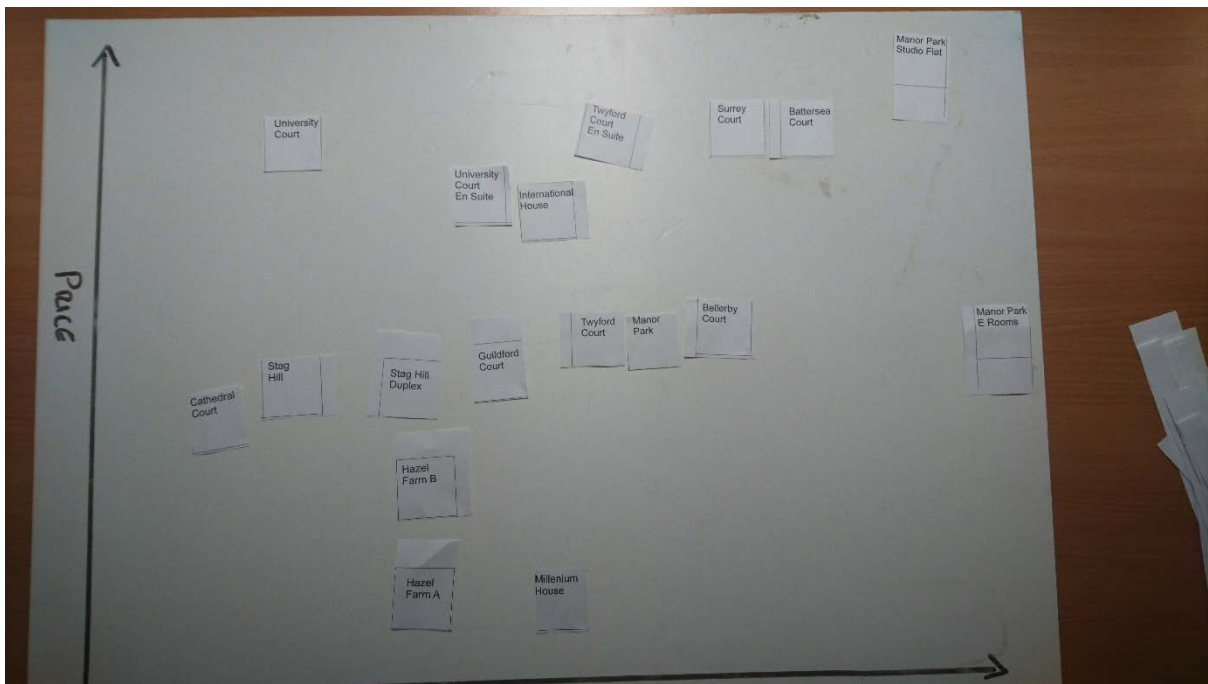
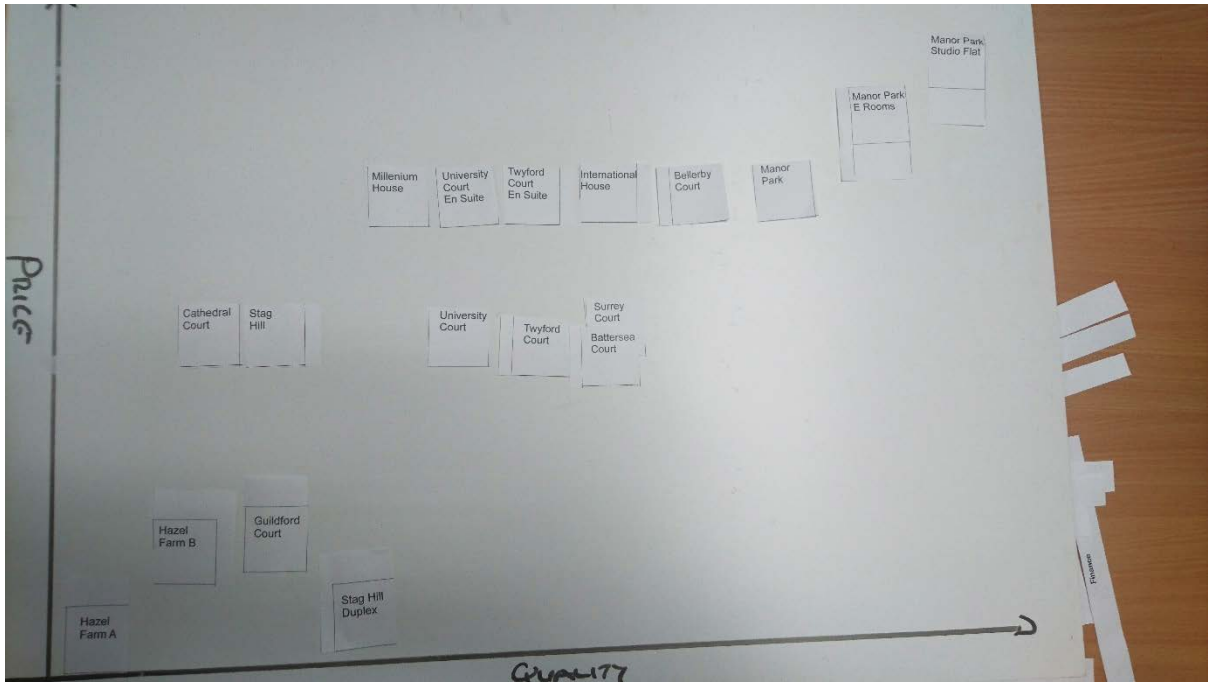
Space and storage is commonly quoted as an issue, as well as the layout of some rooms (e.g. the pinboard located behind the bed head).

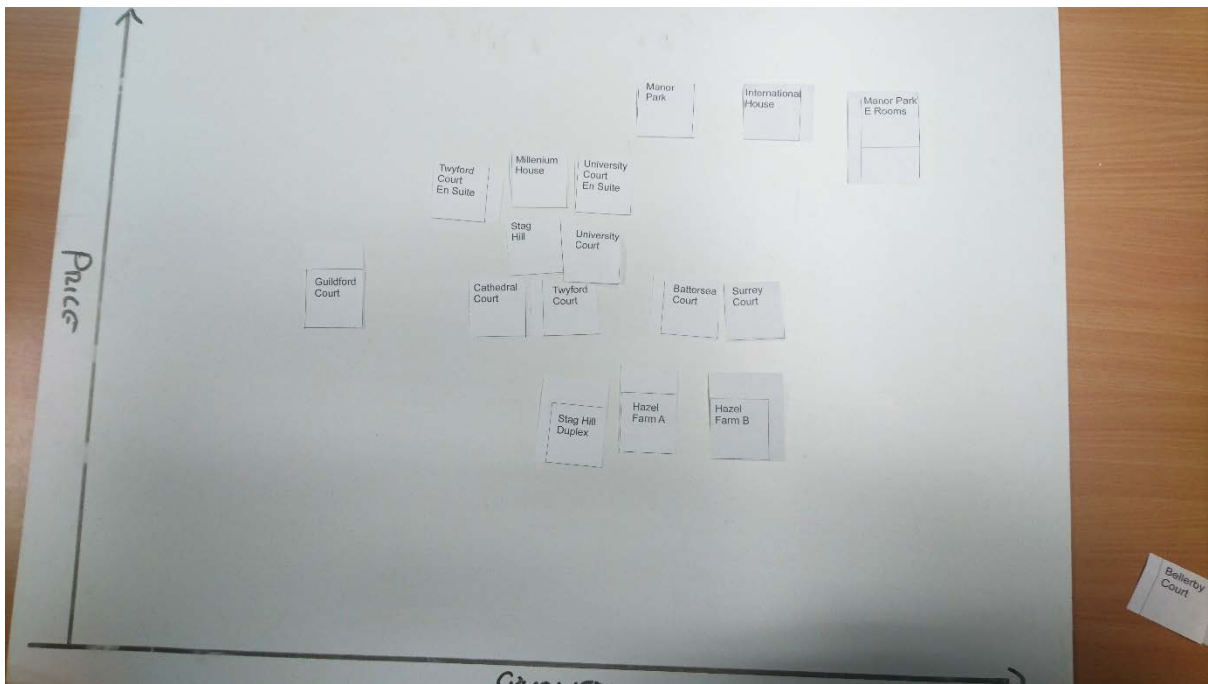
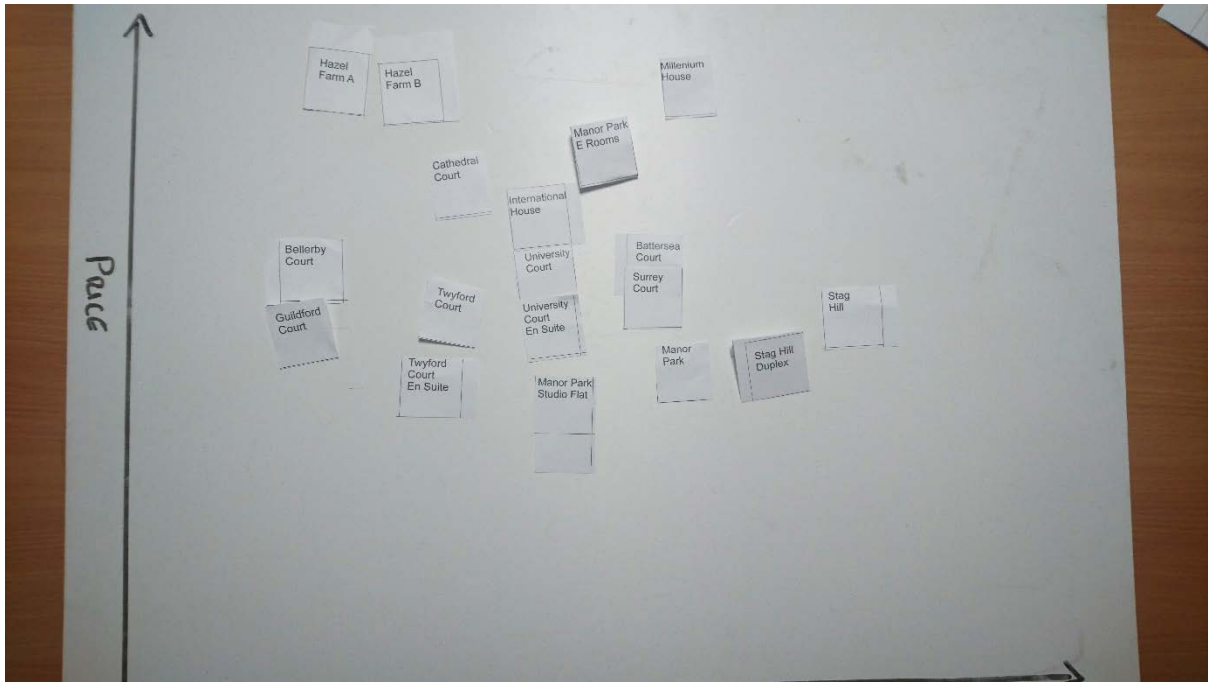
The kitchen size was commonly quoted when comparing how good or bad the kitchen was; Cathedral Court was singled out as having particularly small kitchens. There is an assumption that each kitchen should be able to accommodate all the students that it is designed to service, which is not the case. The problem of space also affects fridge shelf space.

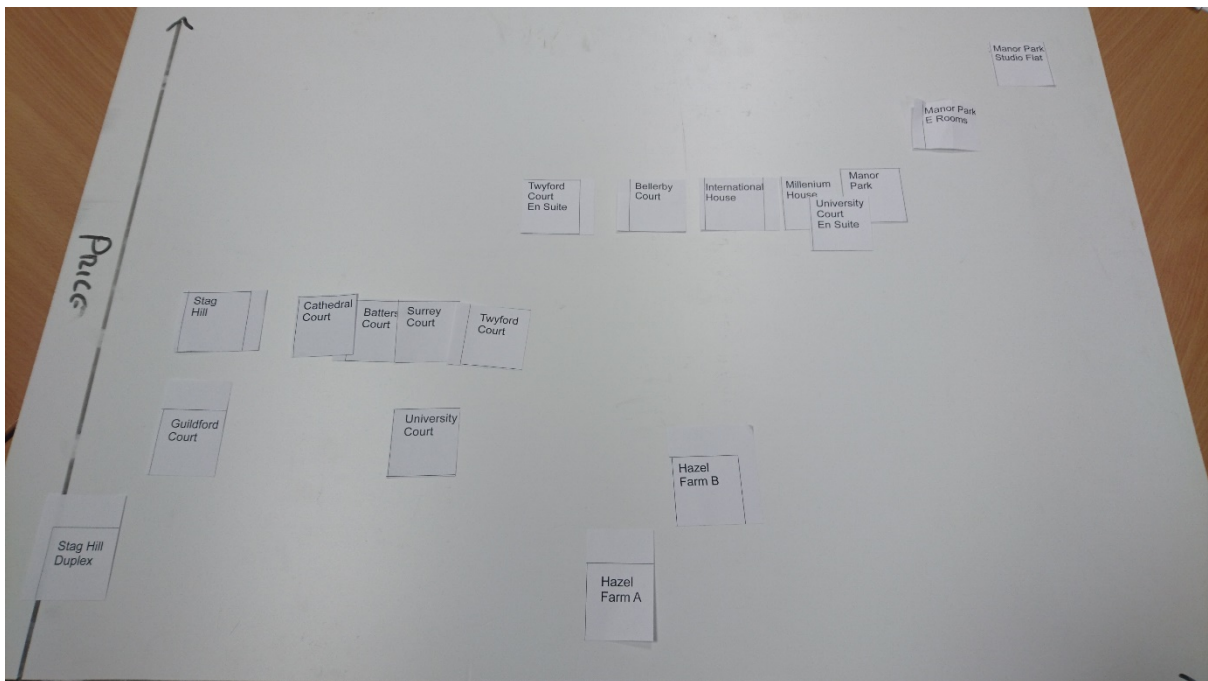
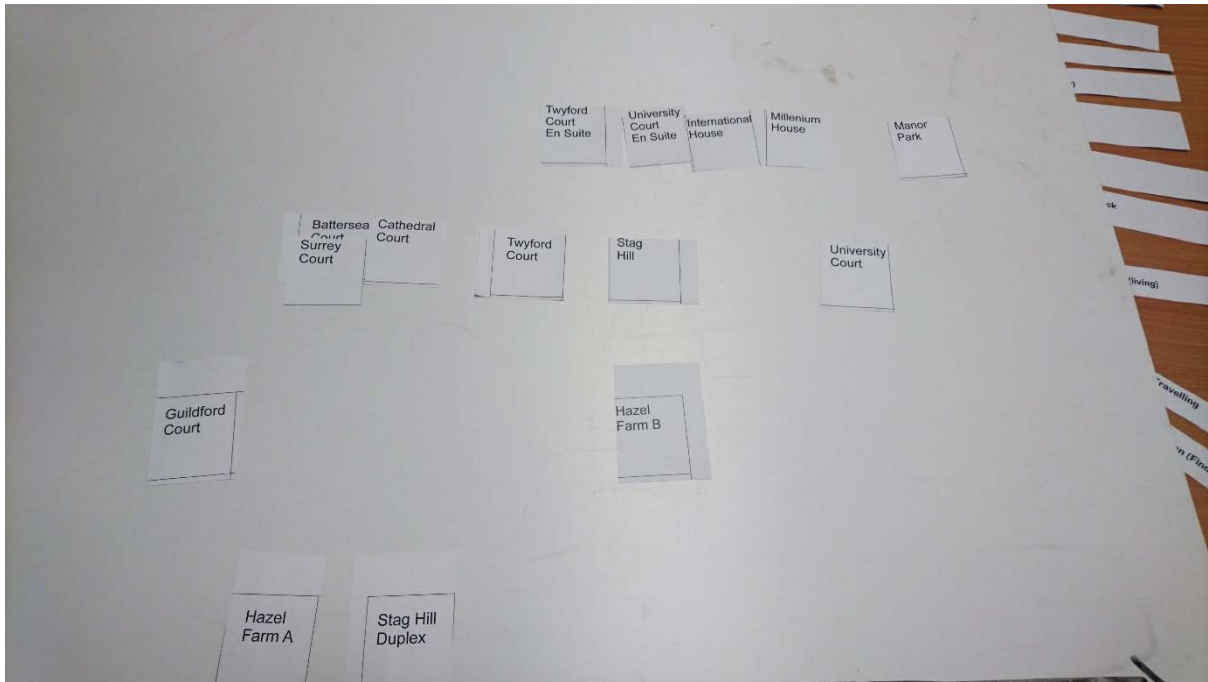
All participants had experienced a failure of a small appliance (kettle, toaster, etc) or larger appliance, which had been fixed or replaced satisfactorily.

## **Quality / Price Court Ranking**

Groups were asked to place the courts on a grid with price on the Y axis, and quality on the X axis. Courts that were of high quality were placed further to the right, and those perceived to be more expensive further to the top.



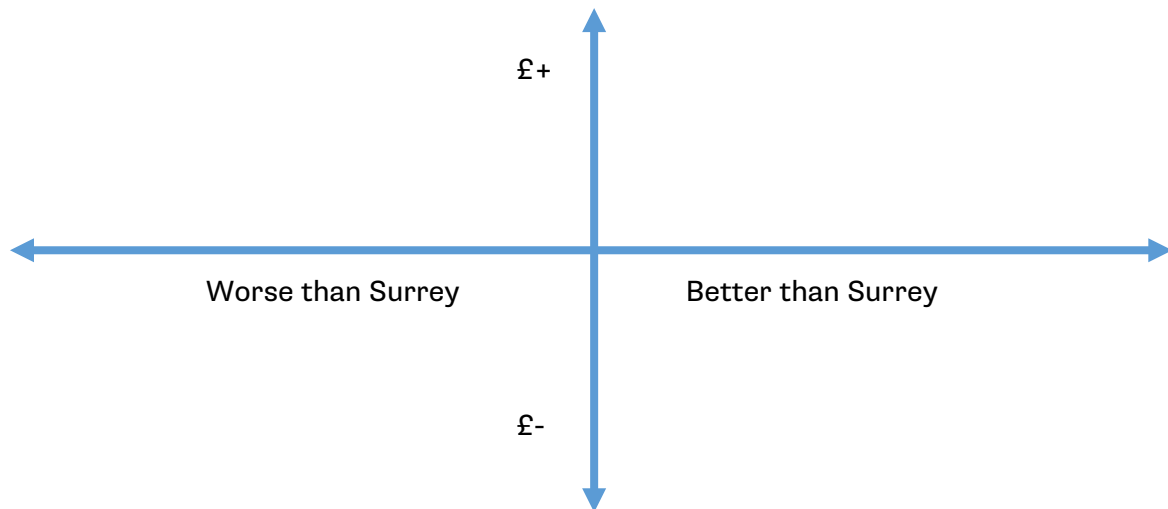




The banding of the rooms increase the sensitivity to variations per court, participants expect that all Band C rooms would be of the same size, quality and facilities – however the smallest of variations within courts are noticed.

## Comparison with other accommodation

Groups were given a variety of photos from student accommodation from around the UK and the world, and told to place them on a grid, as shown below



The images that were placed 'better than Surrey' and that participants felt they would pay more for were described as

- Modern
- Spacious
- Comfortable

All photos of current accommodation from other Universities were placed in the centre, with photos from private providers were in the top right quadrant.

The least popular interiors were







The most popular interior were as follows





The interior design and finish of the most popular images was most appealing along with the perception of space and storage.



## Other Comments

Participants were also allowed to suggest any changes they would like to see in accommodation

- Bigger kitchen
- Nicer kitchen
- Nicer carpets / interiors
- Lounge space in each flat