



Annual Report

2018-2019



A year of progress

Welcome to the Sulets annual report. I am pleased to say that this has been a successful year for the organisation, with improvement recorded in many operational areas.

A statement of success is a phrase that you would expect to see in a report like this. What this document will do is explain what success really looks like for an enterprise like ours.

We are a business that must meet the needs of many different stakeholders, while keeping to our clear not for profit ethos. It is a balance that we work hard to maintain without ever losing sight of the needs of our primary stakeholder the student tenant. This report documents the highlights of our year, with a clear focus on how we have delivered on our mission and values.

I have been particularly pleased with the way that we have made improvements in process and use of technology, which in turn have had a direct impact on quality and customer service. For example, our recently introduced Code of Standards will ensure that our tenants will not only be able to rent safely, being sure that the property they choose is of the highest standard, but that any repairs or maintenance required during their tenancy will be subject to a set of standards for response times and completion.

We have also invested in the advice that we offer potential tenants via our website. We have published several free guides, that were commissioned from an independent welfare advisor. They provide unbiased advice and guidance for anyone looking to rent, not just Sulets customers.

To aid customer service delivery we have upgraded our telephone and IT systems. This has improved efficiency and access for customers and has helped our team manage information and processes more effectively.

Our team continues to improve their skills and knowledge. We have invested heavily in training and development across the business. This expertise not only helps us to be efficient and knowledgeable, but it also helps our landlords improve the quality of their properties and for our tenants to receive the very best in customer service. Training and development is a topic we will expand on further within the report.

The progress made this year gives us a strong platform to make the most of the opportunities ahead. There is no doubt that Sulets can continue to grow its relationships with local landlords and the amount of housing stock that we can offer. We have set targets and activity plans to make that happen. We can also move towards owning and managing our own properties to give us more control over our fortunes. It is a major step to take but one that we are excited about as it will help to secure our medium and longer term future.



Irving Hill
CEO

The Sulets year

It is never easy to sum up all of the events, efforts and initiatives of a business year in a concise way. Especially as it is often the smaller, unrecorded day to day tasks that show an organisation at its best, doing what it does consistently to deliver the service that customers require.

We have tried to capture both the large and more modest parts of the Sulets year here to give you a flavour of what we do and how successful we are at doing it.

There will be plenty of numbers of course but people will also feature prominently. This is because it is the relationships that we develop, and the service that we provide, that allow Sulets to deliver better student accommodation at a fair price.

Our operational year mirrors the academic year and this report records our activities from the arrival of new students in the autumn through to the completion of the University year the following summer.

There are two important ways that Sulets demonstrate our difference from other letting services. Firstly, we are committed to improve quality and standards across all that we do, most notably in the standard of accommodation that we offer students.

Secondly, our provision of free, unbiased, professional advice to students and tenants to ensure their property rental experience is as stress free and enjoyable as possible. Tangible examples of these commitments can be seen in the two activities that follow.

Code of Standards

We operate our own code of standards that covers everything from the condition that any property has to be in before Sulets will let it, through to repairs and how long they should take.

This Code protects both tenants and landlords and ensures that fair, high standards are achieved across our property portfolio. Based on the Decent and Safe Home Standard that guides the work of local authorities, our Code provides a clear and easy to understand benchmark that forms a key part of our commitment to drive up standards in the sector and deliver quality for tenants.

Housing Advice

To further help our potential customers and tenants we have invested in a collection of Advice Guides which are freely available on the Sulets website. These have been written by an external welfare advisor. This means they are unbiased, up to date and accurate. They provide an invaluable source of help and advice for tenants, whether they buy through Sulets or not. Since being published in April 2018, there have been 1,976 page views.



Our mission and values

Sulets was set up with a clear mission to provide better student accommodation at a fair price. This mission, when coupled with our not for profit, charitable status, is delivered through a set of values that drive operational decision making.



The values that form the core of our business are:

- ✓ To raise standards in student housing in Leicester
- ✓ To be transparent and fair
- ✓ To offer value for money
- ✓ To be student friendly
- ✓ To promote the student experience

These are not aspirational, marketing buzz words, they are an unambiguous code that determine the Sulets culture. They can be seen in the daily actions of the Sulets team, some of which are described here.

Sulets has a unique position in the property lettings market in Leicester. The cornerstone of that positioning is our status as an educational charity. This means that we do business a bit differently to our competitors.

That difference was clearly highlighted this year when the UK Government passed the Tenant Fees Bill in June of 2019. Also known as the tenant fee ban, this legislation outlawed many of the fees that letting agents have come to rely on for their income. Things like fees for inventory, application, references, credit checks and so on, can no longer be charged for.

Sulets has never charged tenant fees and we are pleased to see that legislation has finally caught up with our approach. We have been clear about our charges from the start and we think that the new legislation is a positive step forward for the sector.

A £Million saved... and counting

The Sulets commitment to not charging fees has been enshrined in our business ethos since we started trading in 2012, and has generated a huge benefit for students over the last 7 years.

The estimated amount that has been saved is over £1.1 million. That is based on a conservative fee amount of £100 per student. Because we have not charged fees while others have (up until June 1st, 2019 of course) our students have saved.

This is a significant tangible benefit that Sulets has been able to provide for the student community in Leicester.





1828

rooms let in
purpose built
accommodation



141

houses let via
private landlords
for the upcoming
academic year



1,757,380

visitors to the
Sulets website
in 2019



£1.9m

collected on behalf
of our private
landlords

It is clear from feedback received from this year's tenants* that the values of the business and the approach that we take resonate with our target audience. Charging no agency fees, and delivering a trustworthy service, scored highly as reasons for students to use Sulets as opposed to other lettings agencies or dealing with landlords directly. (*Source Annual Sulets Moving Out Survey 2019)

At a more strategic level Sulets has begun a process of feasibility and assessment that will lead to the organisation owning, and potentially developing, our own properties. It is a logical step to take, to use the undoubted skills and experience within the business, and to deploy them on properties where Sulets has more control over decision making and outcomes.

Investing for the Future

First class customer service is the cornerstone of the Sulets offer. To ensure that we continually improve we have recently invested in new telephone and IT systems. These changes will help us to handle enquiries and information more efficiently, which will save time for customers and landlords.

This is a topic that will develop in the coming months and will be central to our future planning and decision making. It is a positive change that will help to ensure Sulets is in control of its own destiny.



Training and development

One of the Sulets values is to provide a highly trusted and honest service.

An essential component of that service delivery is competence. Training and people development have a central role in ensuring that our team have the skills and knowledge required to be trusted experts in their roles. As a business we are committed to that process and have invested throughout the past year.

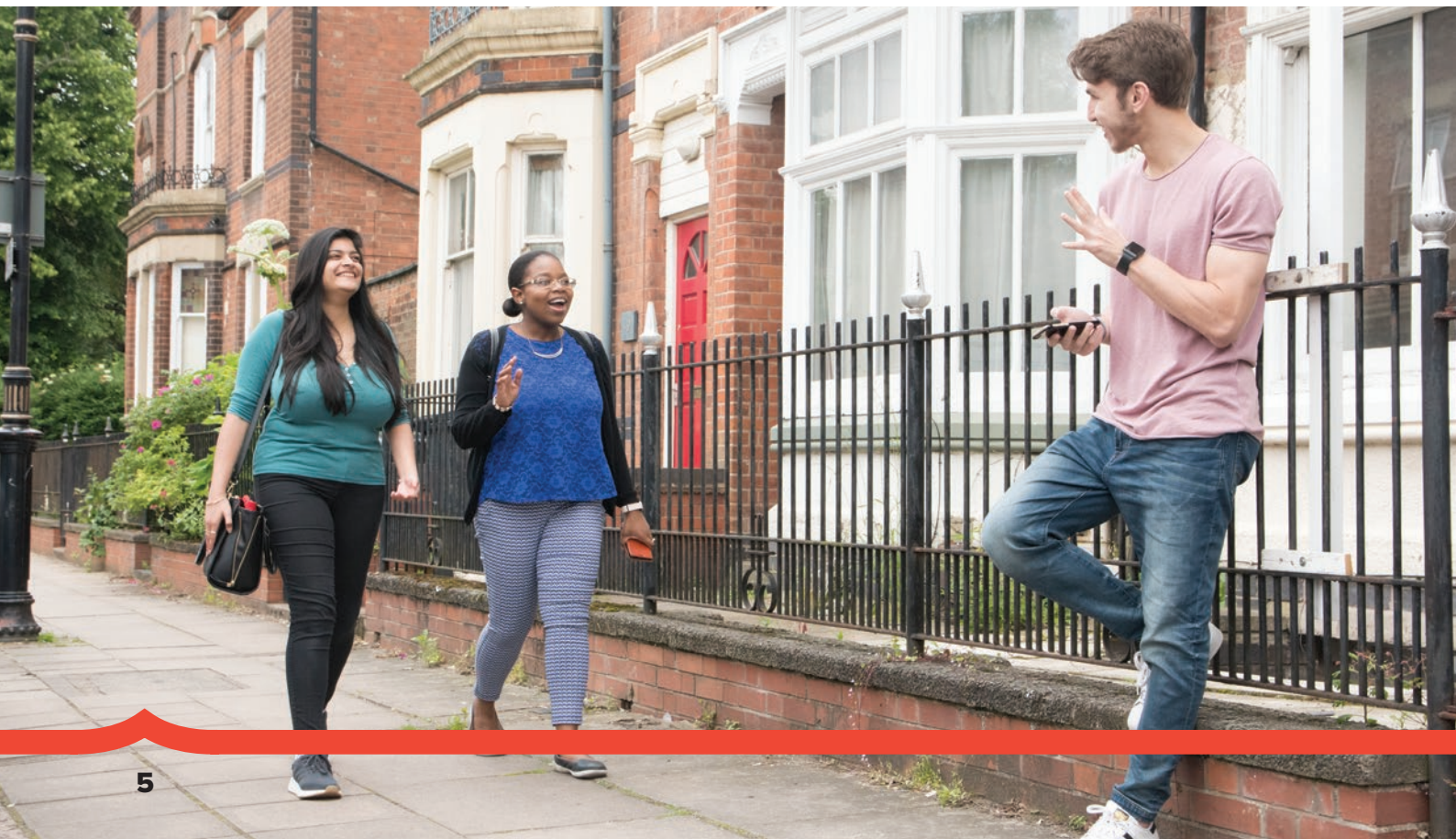
We have called on outside experts to keep the team up to date on fire safety and HMO Regulations, with practical training sessions.

Each member of staff has an Individual Performance Plan that ensures regular review and discussion of development along with the investment in more formal training and learning, if required. We have also invested in professional AAT qualifications for our finance team.

Our property management team have been working hard this year to complete their ARLA qualifications. They have completed their level 3 ARLA Propertymark Technical Award in Residential Lettings & Property Management. This keeps our advice and expertise up to date and ensures that our tenants and landlords receive the very best service and our properties are safe, secure and of high quality.



Our development of people is not limited to the permanent Sulets team. We have taken part in the Frontrunner programme run by De Montfort University. This structured intern programme gives students essential work experience and helps them to build their offer to potential employers. Our Frontrunner Rosella officially started with us in October 2019.





In March of this year we successfully completed our Investors in People review.

This endorsement, and independent assessment, by the liP demonstrates to our stakeholders the qualities of the Sulets business. We are proud to be able to continue to use the liP logo as recognition of successful completion of the assessment process.

The award shows that this business values, and invests in, the development of its people. That commitment enables us to gain from the benefits of people development, as laid out on the liP website. They are:

- **development of better leaders**
- **the use of efficient structures and effective teams**
- **a culture of continuous improvement**

This provides us with a framework that allows us to define our culture and the ability to measure feedback, enabling us to benchmark ourselves against previous years and other businesses.

In the words of the assessor, it was ‘hard to find faults’ and ‘Sulets embodies the Investors in People standard’. This recognition is particularly important for Sulets as our not for profit status means we set high standards and pride ourselves on delivering a trusted and honest service. This can only happen if our people are experts in their field, have the skills necessary to look after customers and understand fully what the Sulets brand stands for. The recognition of our high standards by liP is a valuable independent assessment of our approach.

For more information about the Investors in People process go here: www.investorsinpeople.com



**INVESTORS
IN PEOPLE**

“Sulets embodies the Investors in People standard”

liP Assessor

The student experience

One of the most important aspects of the Sulets business, and therefore one of the key measures of our success, is the feedback from customers and tenants in particular.

We send out an annual survey and a selection of the feedback from that exercise is shown here. This gives us some detailed insight into the experience of our tenants and the areas that we can improve in future.

To add to the survey results we have included the feedback gathered from the regular reviews that customers make via Google.

These not only give us an overall rating, and help with our search engine optimisation, they also help us to monitor service and deal with any issues as they arise. The Survey has an important role to play in providing a benchmark that allows us to assess performance and customer mood year on year.

One of the key areas - directly linked to our mission to provide good value accommodation for students in Leicester - is the feedback on whether our rents provide good value for money.



In this years survey 86% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their rent was good value for money

– up 11% from last year.

This is a positive response and shows that our work with Landlords helps to keep our rates competitive and good value.

Another critical area of service delivery is the interaction tenants have with the Sulets viewing and booking process.

The viewing, application, and sign up process for tenants was seen as straight forward and easy by 95% of respondents, which is 2% better than the previous year.

This is another positive outcome as it directly links to our values to enable a straightforward process.



Would you recommend Sulets?

Perhaps the most important metric measured by the survey is the ‘would you recommend Sulets?’ question.

This years survey returned a figure of 83% for tenants who would recommend us to other students.

Up 5% from the previous year.

This is a significant improvement in a 12-month period and is testament to the efforts of the team to raise the quality of our properties and provide excellent service to our tenants.

The headline financials

This year has seen another strong financial performance for the organisation.

The key element has been growth in income across many activities. Tight control of cost continues to be central to our financial stability and is a key requirement for a business of our size. That does not mean that expenditure has been frozen, where investments have been made (in IT, training, professional services and insurances) they have been evaluated, targeted and necessary, to ensure we continue to optimise customer service and operational efficiency.

Sales Success

This year has seen a significant increase in income as a result of taking on more properties and then letting them successfully. Year on year there has been a 15% growth in the number of private landlord properties let.

This has led to a boost in fee income, earnings from commission and other charges for services such as maintenance. By outperforming the plan for income this year, the business has been able to post a healthy profit for 2018 -19.

Important Areas of Investment

This year we have improved the IT and telephone system in the business. We have also continued to invest in staff training with professional qualifications and sessions with external consultants. This expenditure, along with increased professional services and insurance costs, have been offset by underspend against plan on salaries, pensions and depreciation. The main driver of improved net profit though has been growth in sales income.

The Overall Picture

Net profit for the year is
£212,811

Which is **£75,406** ahead of the previous year

The combined increase in sales and control of costs mean that profit was **£102,172** ahead of the annual plan for this year.

The full Sulets audited accounts are available via Companies House.

Student feedback

Throughout the year users of the Sulets service are encouraged to leave reviews.

This process serves three important functions. Firstly, it allows tenants to express opinions about their experience which in turn allows us to learn and make improvements where necessary. Secondly, it allows potential users to understand more about Sulets and what it is like to use our service. And finally, reviews of this type on the right platforms help our visibility on search engines, which in turn, helps us to be found by prospective tenants.

Some examples of the feedback we receive are shown here.

“I have to stay at my studio for a couple of weeks after my tenancy and get my contract extended. It’s a bit complex because I was outside of the UK. Everyone working for the Sulets office offered me great help, giving me suggestions and instructions.”

“The rooms are big with great lighting, couldn’t wish for better! Thank you Sulets!”

“Superb Service, I’ve just booked accommodation for my son who will be starting at DMU this October, Emma and Lottie were both fantastic. They helped with all my questions and made the process so simple, it really is appreciated and I’d have no hesitation in recommending either. If the actual accommodation is anything like the booking service so far it’ll be amazing.”

“Beautiful accommodation, friendly staff, excellent service”

“Everyone was so lovely and helpful! So happy with my studio! Thank you Sulets!”

“I cant wait to move in for my third year with Sulets!”

“I booked my accommodation with Sulets and it was an easy, quick and clear process. I highly recommend Sulets as people such as Ruta are very helpful and informative making the process less stressful and much more delightful for students.”

“Highly recommend Sulets. The staff have always been great, helping us whenever we have any problems or queries. More recently, we had an issue with our fridge which the Landlord had only recently replaced. They contacted the manufacturer under the warranty and the manufacturer was useless. Having rented both privately and as a student I have always been impressed with the service that the team offer.”

“Received fantastic customer service from Emma who was very friendly when showing me round the really nice accommodations and then she responded very quickly to my questions the next day and was very helpful and able to help me when I wanted to switch to a different studio. Can’t wait to move in in September. Highly recommend.”



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