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Running a rooms ballot: a rough guide

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For any JCR Committee member running a rooms ballot.

Introduction

The principles of the rooms ballot are simple: each student picks their room for the next year from those available in an order predetermined by a ballot. There are no constitutional words giving any advice here, except that it is the job of the Services Officer, but the guide below gives an indication as to how it has been approached in recent years.

Although the constitution singles out Services Officers as responsible for rooms ballots, other JCR committee members, such as the Vice-President or those with IT skills often play an active role in the planning also.

Also a word of warning here: the rooms ballot often can be an emotional time for many, so be prepared for tears / raised voices / custard pies from disappointed undergraduates. Some of them are unavoidable, but even if you run a perfect rooms ballot there will be those who couldn't get quite what you want and will feel aggrieved at this.

Timing

In the years prior to 2005, the outgoing JCR committee conducted the rooms ballot just after the handover of power. In 2005 the incoming committee took the job instead, and the ballot took place at the end of Lent term rather than the middle. Although the ballot is best done in Lent, not Easter (as otherwise fourth year students will not have time to look for accommodation if they cannot secure a room through the rooms ballot) it is up to an individual committee's discretion to decide when to hold the ballot, and whether it should be run by incoming or outgoing committees. The advantage to an outgoing committee running the ballot is that they know the ropes and have more JCR experience, but the incoming committee then have to clear up the aftermath of any mistakes they may make. The earlier the ballot is held, the more time fourth years then have to find alternatives, but the less time people have to work out who they want to live with and where: both decisions, when to have the ballot and which committee should run it, are not obvious choices, each committee should make their own decisions on these matters.

Your Rough Timetable of events should look as follows:

(Assuming date has already been decided.)

2 weeks before picking weekend: Q&A session with informed members of JCR committee

1 ½ weeks before picking weekend: Deadline for syndicate applications from current first years.

1 week before picking weekend: Timings of picking weekend announced and publicised.

Saturday of picking weekend: Current second years pick rooms for their third year

Sunday of picking weekend: Current first years pick rooms for their second year

After picking weekend: Current third years pick from any rooms left for their fourth year.

Ever After: Be prepared for queries and complications to arise which you will be called on to sort out.

A guide to each event on the timetable:

Q&A Session (2 weeks before picking weekend (or PW in future references))

This is best held in the bar or in the hall. Here any students who have questions about the rooms ballot should be able to ask informed JCR committee members about these queries. Whoever is running the rooms ballot should therefore be there.

The Q&A session should last a reasonable length of time, say an hour, and perhaps start with an explanation of the syndicate system and general rooms ballot for any first years. Publicise this session on the website and via email at least, as if people can get their queries answered here it will save you bother in the longer run, when they won't need to email you their problems.

Deadline for syndicate applications

This is solely for current first years. They have never picked rooms before, so must decide whom they wish to live with for the next year. First years may group into syndicates to guarantee that they will pick a room at the same time as their friends. Traditionally these syndicates have been limited to four, though in 2005 a limit of six was placed instead. It is up to an individual committee to decide what maximum syndicate size, if any, they want first years to take. Four is a useful number, as much accommodation is in blocks of eight rooms, but it is also hard to limit some people to only three friends, particularly with friendship groups of five or six.

The deadline should be widely publicised to current first years. Any application should take the form of a piece of paper with the syndicate name and ordered names of people within the syndicate upon it, placed within a rooms ballot organiser's pigeon hole before the deadline.

Timings of picking weekend announced and publicised

Each student should be allocated around three minutes to pick his or her room.

The current second years pick first from all the available rooms in the college, and you should give them all a time on the Saturday of the picking weekend to do this. The order for current second years is simple to achieve: invert the order they picked their rooms in for the previous year. A list of this order should be available from previous JCR committees, on the website, or from T&A if you ask nicely enough.

The current first years pick from rooms left after the current second years have picked. They should all be given times on the Sunday to pick their rooms. The order of current first years is determined by a ballot: take each syndicate and each student not in a syndicate as an individual entry in the ballot. Draw each syndicate or individual student out in a random manner, and the order of the picking times should follow the order you draw out these entries. If a syndicate is drawn out, place all members on the ballot of the

syndicate in the order they were entered on their application form, if an individual is drawn out, simply add them as the next entry. Repeat until all first years now have a time. (Remember, each syndicate has only ONE entry in the ballot, no matter how many people are in the syndicate, and ALL of the members of the syndicate are placed one after another when that SINGLE entry is drawn out. There is then no advantage or disadvantage to being in a syndicate, except that your friends will pick rooms at similar times to you).

Current third years should pick rooms from what is left after current first and second years have had a pick. The order of picking third years is determined by a separate ballot with no syndicates allowed. The third years then pick from available rooms until no more rooms are available, or no more third years want a college room. To determine which third years should be in this ballot, email them before hand with a deadline for applications to be housed in college rooms, and only include those who reply in the ballot.

All people who desire a room in college should now have a personal time to pick a room. Publicise these times and ensure everyone knows when he or she is expected to attend. Remind people that rooms can be picked by proxy if necessary, if the rooms ballot cannot be attended in person, or by ringing a member of the JCR committee to get them to pick for them. As long as you are sure it is an individual's true intention that a rooms be picked either by proxy or by telephone in this way you needn't worry about a person actually being present when their room is picked.

As an extra note, certain people will pick their rooms before the rest, due to disabilities or other special needs. These people should contact T&A before the rest of the ballot is organised to sort this out, and you should then not allocate them a picking time: they will already have a room organised. There is nothing you need to do for these people; the rooms they pick should already have been withdrawn from the list of available rooms before you receive it.

The picking of rooms

Here is a checklist of things to have prepared before the actual picking takes place:

- ✓ A list of available rooms in college
- ✓ A list of the times students are going to pick, with boxes next to each name to mark down which room they have chosen, and a box for their signature
- ✓ A rota for manning the rooms ballot
- ✓ A room for picking to take place in
- ✓ Get room blueprints and finalise rooms costs

These things are best arranged as follows:

A **list of available rooms in college** is obtainable by emailing the T&A or accommodation officer of the college. This list will be of all rooms that can be chosen by current first, second and third years, and should not contain any rooms already selected by those with disabilities or other needs, or those selected by MML students or MIT exchange students the previous year.

A list of students who are picking, including times, rooms picked, whether the student wants a 30 or 39 weeks contract and signatures must be constructed yourself. This acts as the paperwork to confirm which rooms each student has selected. It is a good idea to have two copies of this, so that one can be handed in to the college accommodations officer and the JCR committee can keep one for reference. Please contact previous JCR committees for templates of what these should look like.

A rota of manning the picking should use JCR committee members, and is best with two members on hand at all times to ensure fair picking and answer any questions. It is often a good idea to have an IT 'expert' either present or available on the end of a phone to answer any IT queries if you are relying upon IT. This is best organised some way in advance, or else people may mysteriously be unable to help, and a few people will have to cover lots of time.

A room for picking to take place in can simply be the JCR office, though this is a little cramped. If you want to use live internet updates, whichever room you use must have an internet connection. Rooms are booked through the conference office, in E staircase at the time of writing.

Get room blueprints and finalise rooms costs is something best done with the domestic bursar. The 2004/05 JCR committee rebanded rooms during their tenure, but room prices should still be reviewed prior to the ballot, as once students have selected rooms it would be very bad practice to change prices later. Ensure all rooms have prices you are happy with prior to selection day, therefore, and that these prices are available to the students when they select rooms. The blueprints are mainly to give an indication of the look of rooms to selecting students, and should be available in the picking room for extra information.

Other notes for picking of rooms:

30/39 week contracts:

In certain rooms, those on Lensfield Road or in Gonville Place, there is an option for a student to have a 39 week contract rather than a 30 week contract. At the time of writing this applied to all Gonville and Lensfield rooms, except those in 24, 36 and 38 Lensfield Road. Where a student has chosen a room with this option, ask them which contract they would prefer and make a note of it, reminding them that they will have to pay for a 39 week contract should they opt for it, but would be freer to stay longer in their rooms, or leave stuff there, etc.

MML/MIT students:

Both of these types of students spend a year away (normally the third year). If this is the case, they will be accommodated the following year in a room picked the year before they go away. This room must be picked from those available at their time in the ballot, as if they would still be in college that

next year. Do not withdraw that room from the ballot after they have selected it, however, but let others, who *will* be in college the next year select it also. These selections should then be notified to the accommodations officer and T&A, who will withdraw those rooms from the *next* year's ballot. You should already have been told which rooms have been withdrawn from the ballot for MML and MIT students from the year before.

Reminder: MML students DO NOT get a pick of ALL rooms in college for their fourth year, but a pick of ALL ROOMS LEFT in THEIR PLACE IN THE BALLOT. This is in the interests in fairness, and due to regular misunderstandings of this point, you should inform all MIT and MML students of this very explicitly well in advance of the ballot.

Latecomers

If someone misses their allocated time, they should be allowed to pick whenever they turn up. Do not stop the ballot waiting for them to turn up, if they miss their chance, then they must take a room later on, when others have picked. If they miss the whole day, they can pick early the next day, but DO NOT grant them any extra concessions, this is a case where if you miss your chance, tough luck, you will have to pick lower down the ballot. This is to stop any tactical lateness or other shenanigans that may go on. Be harsh, here, it is the fairest way.

Oriental studies students

Oriental Studies students are only in college for the first term of their third year. Second-year Oriental Studies students pick a room for the first term of their third year. They will then live in the same room when they return in their fourth year.

Changing rooms after they have been picked

As with lateness, this is a case of harshness. No rooms should be changed after they have been picked; it is as simple as that. Any complaints should be taken to a student's tutor, but any change of room picking after the initial pick alters the state of the ballot and is very unfair on those below them in the ballot, so should not be done.

Tidying up...

All students should sign the papers confirming their choice of rooms, email those who missed it after the event and arrange a session for them to sign it individually.

When all students have picked, hand a copy of the document detailing all rooms selected by students, whether they want a 30 or 39 week contract, and whether they are MML students or not, etc. to the accommodations officer.

Then sit back and wonder whether the room *you* picked in all the rush was the one you wanted after all...

Appendix:

Ok, calling this an appendix was a bit of a stretch, but still it seemed to need a place.

A mention must be made of IT possibilities. These offer the opportunity to give people live updates of what rooms have been selected before them and so forth, before they get to their allotted time.

This is complicated stuff, however, so I recommend you get in contact with previous committees to work out how to get such gubbins working successfully. It is much recommended, however, as it is a very useful tool, and very popular amongst students picking rooms.