

BROKEN FOUNDATIONS: FIX STUDENT HOUSING



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national union of students

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INTRODUCTION

The post-16 educational landscape in Wales has changed considerably over the last decade and has faced even greater challenges over the last 12 months, responding to the Coronavirus crisis. This year, student accommodation and housing has been at the forefront of the debate, drawing parallels to the renewed, wider debate on housing we have seen in Wales.

This report, commissioned by NUS Wales and carried out by Shelter Cymru unpicks some of the myths around students and their housing situations across the Welsh post-16 sector. It is based on a Wales-wide survey run by Shelter Cymru in May-June 2021.

The findings help to paint a picture of students' experiences in the 2020-21 academic year, giving us a better understanding of the issues students face when it comes to having a safe and secure home.

FOREWORD



Becky Ricketts, NUS Wales President

For decades, student housing has been a byword for low quality. Being ripped off by dodgy landlords, living with broken appliances and having to put up with damp and mould are seen as part of student life, to be tolerated and left unchallenged.

Of course, this was wrong when student accommodation was cheaper than other forms of housing, but with costs spiralling, it's now just as hard to find somewhere affordable to live as it is to find somewhere that is good quality and fit for habitation.

As President of NUS Wales, I want to challenge the idea that students should just put up with shoddy housing as a rite of passage. That's why we're working with Shelter Cymru to shine a light on student housing injustices and demonstrate the need for stronger rights and protections for student renters.

This report represents the first stage of that work and exposes the extent to which housing issues affect students' daily lives. To inform the report we surveyed hundreds of students at universities across Wales, revealing their experiences of housing

and the real, detrimental impact that poor-quality accommodation has on students.

According to our survey, more than half of students in Wales are living with damp or mould in their accommodation. 46% have to put up with disrepair and 31% have had issues with their landlords. These numbers will come as little surprise to many students, but it's the knock-on impacts of these problems that are the greatest cause for concern.

It's clear that the place you live has a fundamental impact on your quality of life, but our survey shows first-hand the extent to which substandard housing is feeding into the student mental health crisis. A staggering 65% – almost two thirds of students – told us that housing issues have had an impact on their mental health and well-being.

We already know that students experience mental health issues more than the general population, and that a combination of financial, social and academic pressures contribute to this. Add housing into the mix and we get a clear picture of how students' environments have such a fundamental impact on their wellbeing while at university.

35% of students said housing issues affected their physical health and 26% said they affected their academic achievements – a problem exacerbated by the pandemic when students spent more time than ever studying in their rooms.

The figures speak for themselves, and our asks are basic – for all students to be protected equally, for all students to be able to hold their landlords to account, and for all students to be able to afford to live in safe and decent housing. There's a clear evidence base for change in the student housing sector.

Our asks are simple, and I hope this report will be the start of real change for students. Student housing is broken at the foundations, it's time to fix it once and for all.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Most students in Wales live in the private rented sector (PRS);
- Over 75% of students pay £120 per week or less for their housing;
- Only 4 in 10 students rated their accommodation as being good, or very good value for money, almost 1 in 4 students rated their accommodation as poor, or very poor;
- Over half of students reported damp and mould as issues in their homes, 46% of students said disrepair was a problem and 31% of students said they had experienced problems with their landlord;
- 1 in 3 students said affordability was a problem they faced in their accommodation;
- Over half of students said they would seek support for their housing issues from family and friends;
- 31% of students said they would seek support from their students' union, 30% said they would ask their education provider for support;
- 22% of students said they would seek support from Citizens' Advice Bureau and only 8% of students said they would contact Shelter Cymru for support with their housing;
- 65% of students said that issues with their accommodation had a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing;
- 35% of students said that issues with their accommodation had a negative impact on their physical health and wellbeing;
- More than 1 in 4 students said issues with their accommodation had a negative impact on their academic achievement.

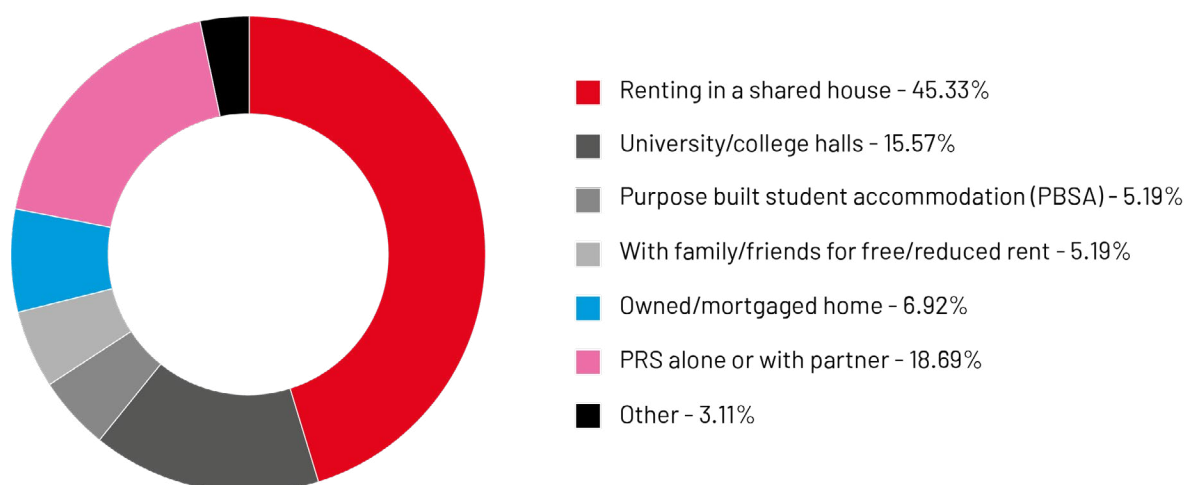
RECOMMENDATIONS

We believe the following set of recommendations can start the process of making the transformative change needed to address the issues noted in this report.

- 1. All students must have the same rights and protections regardless of where they live**
The student housing market exists for students. Every student, regardless of their background or who their accommodation provider is, should have the same protections as any other student. The system must start from the student, not from the landlord.
- 2. All students must be able to hold their landlords to account**
There must be proper accountability for providers who break the rules. Regardless of what sort of provider they are, they must all be held to the same standard and students must have simple and easy access to recourse.
- 3. All students must be able to afford to live in safe and healthy housing**
Affordability is disappearing from the sector. The current system punishes those with the least and the amount of affordable housing is dropping year on year. Students shouldn't have to choose between mouldy flats and sky-high rents.

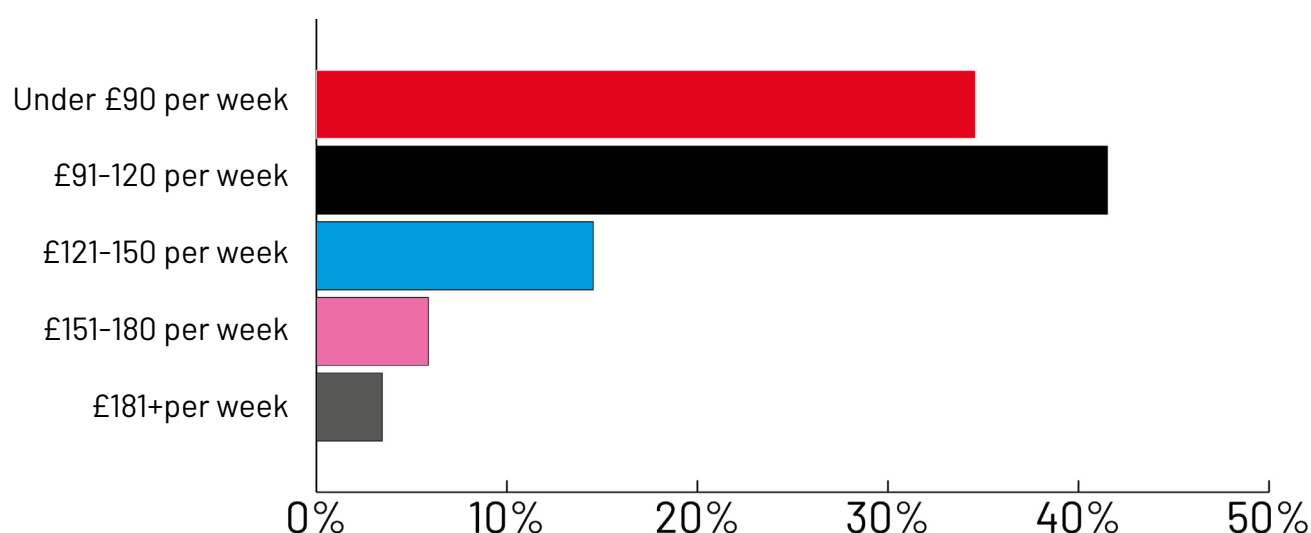
A SNAPSHOT OF FINDINGS

What types of accommodation are students living in?



Most students live in the private rented sector (PRS), either in houses of multiple occupation (HMOs) or renting their own home alone or with a partner/children. A significant number of students live in university-owned halls of residence.

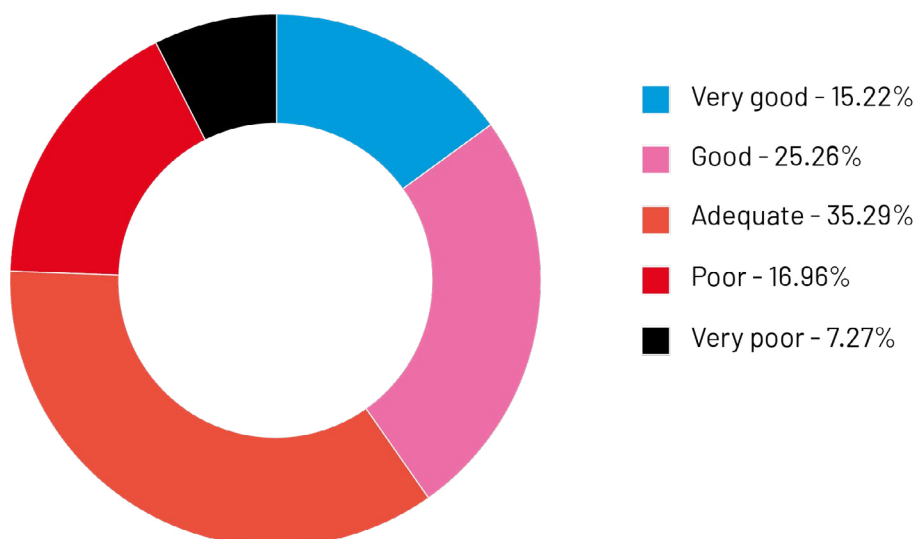
How much are students paying?



The vast majority of students we surveyed pay £120 or less per week, though significant numbers of students are paying beyond this amount.

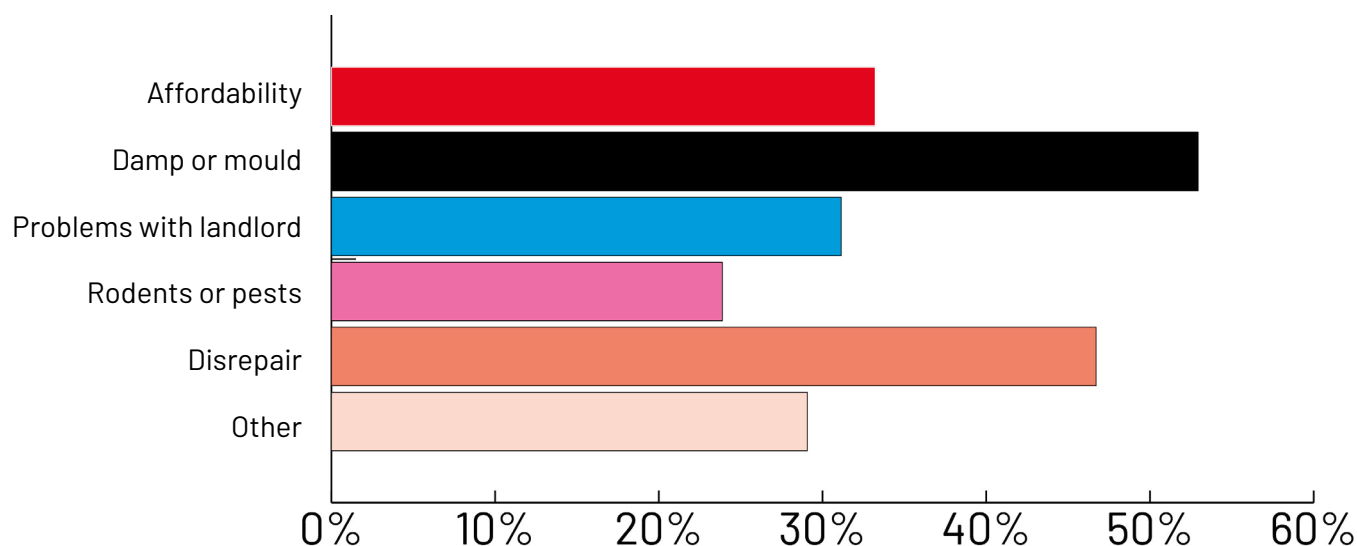
A SNAPSHOT OF FINDINGS

Value for Money



Only 40% of students rated their accommodation as “good” or “very good” value for money. Nearly 25% of students rated their accommodation as “poor” or “very poor” value for money.

What problems do students face in their accommodation?

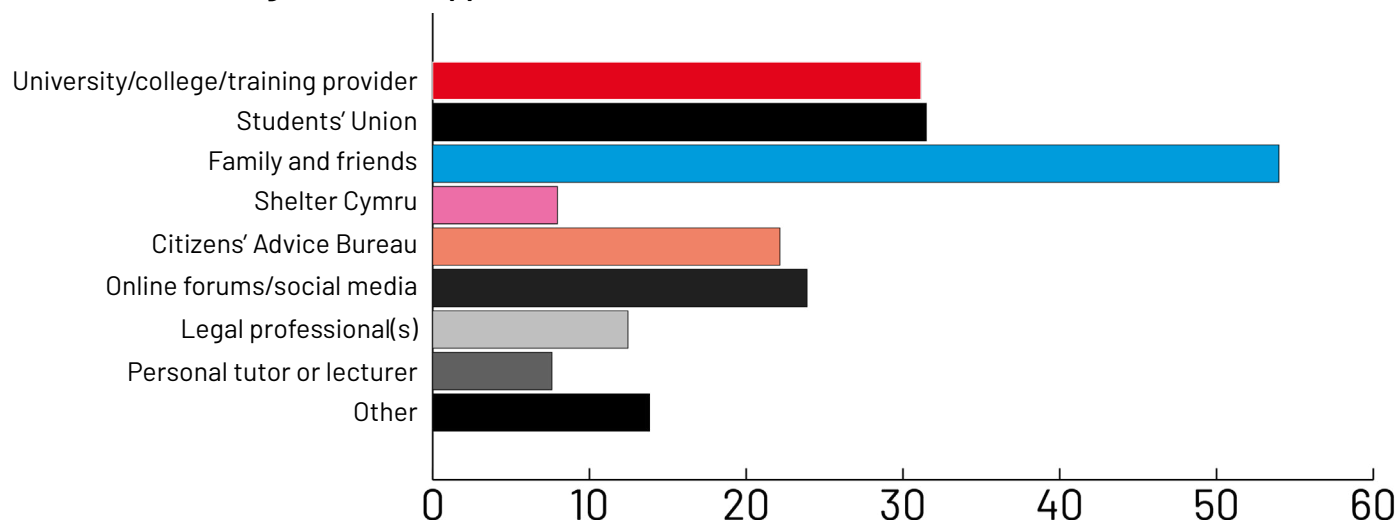


By far the most common problem reported to us was damp or mould, with over half of students reporting this as an issue in their accommodation. Disrepair was a close second and issues in affording accommodation was another common problem. The main themes reported in the “other” section, were:

- Student accommodation being rented to non-students;
- Charges for damages and/or utilities from previous tenants being passed onto new tenants before they had even moved in;
- Lack of space, indoors and outdoors;
- Poor quality furniture and appliances;
- Noise pollution.

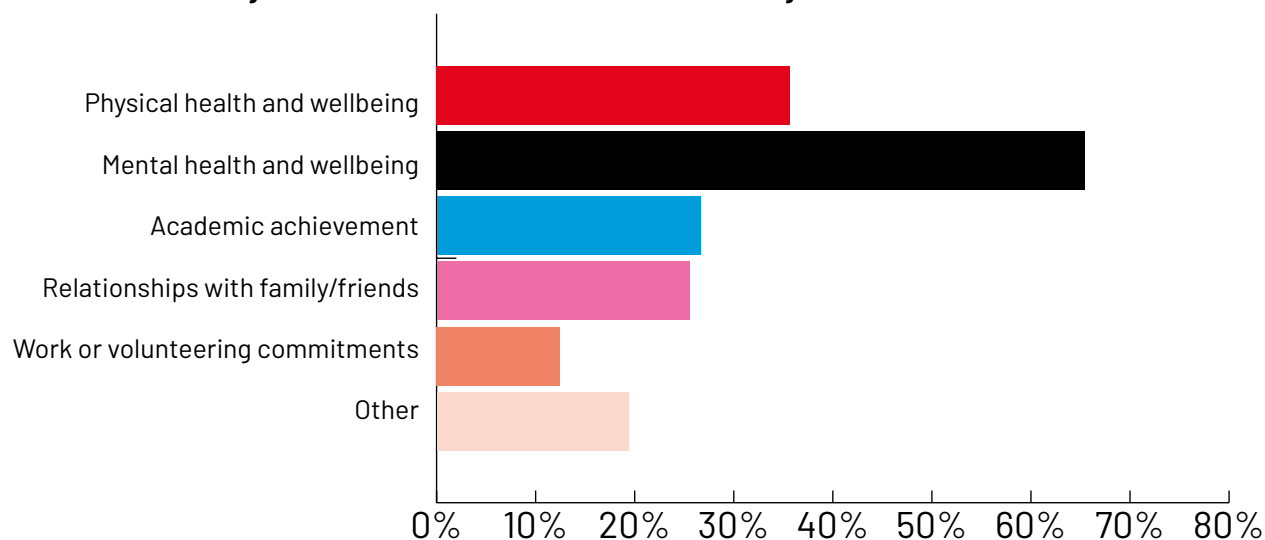
A SNAPSHOT OF FINDINGS

Where do students go to seek support?



More than 50% of students said they would approach friends or family if they needed support for any housing issues. Around 1 in 3 said they would seek support from their SU or education provider. Interestingly, a low number of students said they would seek support from housing and advice experts such as Citizens' Advice Bureau (22%) and Shelter Cymru (8%).

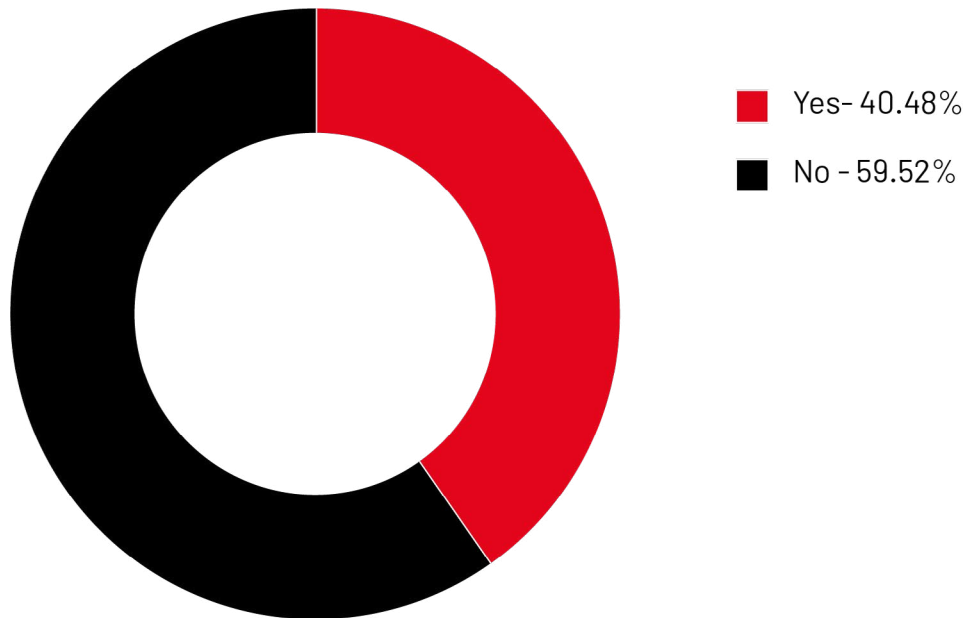
Have issues with your accommodation had an effect on you?



A shocking 65% of students said that issues with their accommodation had a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing. A further 35% said issues with housing had a negative impact on their physical health and more than 1 in 4 said their academic achievement had been negatively impacted as a result of housing issues. This shows a clear link between students' housing and other fundamental aspects of their lives.

A SNAPSHOT OF FINDINGS

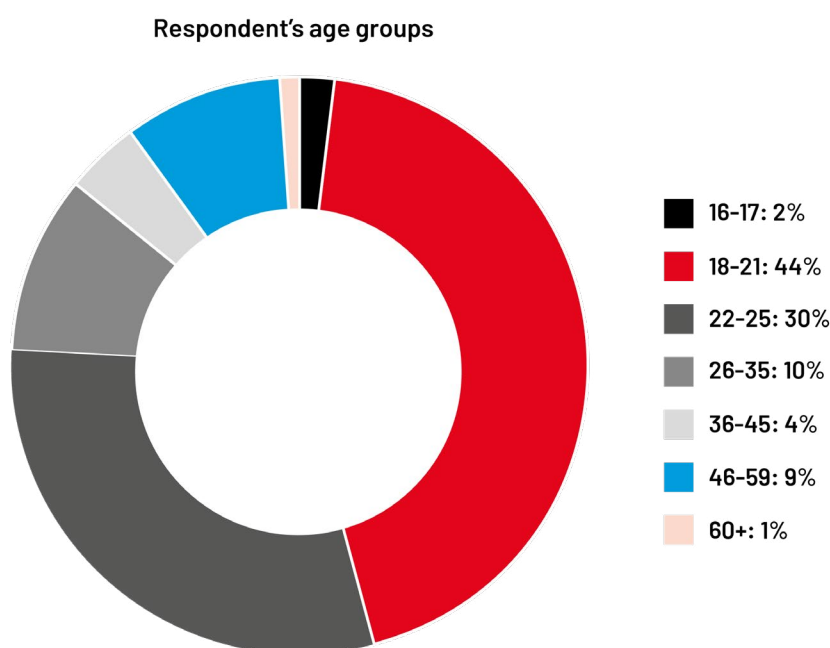
Have you ever felt pressured into signing a contract for accommodation without understanding it or having the time to consider your options?



More than 40% of students said that they had felt pressured into signing contracts or lease agreements without fully understanding them, or being given the time to consider their options.

ABOUT THE STUDENTS

Shelter Cymru surveyed 293 students from the Welsh post-16 sector between May and June 2021. The vast majority of respondents were in the more stereotypical student age ranges, with over 70% of respondents aged 16-25.



Around 20% of respondents were studying for a postgraduate qualification, over 70% of respondents were studying qualifications at L4-L6 and 6% of respondents were studying qualifications at L3.

Nearly 90% of respondents were home students, around 10% of respondents were International/EU/EEA students.

We received good coverage in responses from across the higher education sector in Wales, with responses from:

- Swansea University
- University of Wales Trinity Saint David
- University of South Wales
- Aberystwyth University
- Bangor University
- Cardiff University

We also received a number of responses from further education providers, Cardiff and Vale College, Gower College and Coleg Sir Gâr. A small number of respondents did not clearly indicate which educational institution they were a member of.

Geographically, there was representation from most local authority areas in the responses, the only areas not to have a respondent were Denbighshire, Merthyr Tydfil, Monmouthshire and Torfaen. Perhaps this is a reflection of a HE-heavy set of respondents, given each of these local authorities are not immediately in the vicinity of a higher education institution.

KEY THEMES EXPLORED

Where do the students live?

Our research found that around 45% of respondents lived in houses of multiple occupancy (HMOs) in the private rented sector (PRS). Almost 20% responded saying that they too lived in the PRS but not in HMOs, renting alone or with a partner.

Only around 15% of respondents said that they were living in university/college-owned accommodation and around 5% in privately-owned purpose built student accommodation, (PBSA).

Around 6% of respondents identified themselves as living in their own home that was mortgaged or owned outright and a further 5% were living with family or friends for free or a reduced rate of rent.

These findings broadly reflect the picture we can see painted by other, existing data sets. [HESA shows](#) "other rented accommodation" as a clear preference among their data sets, but a further strong number for "own residence" which they class as "a student's permanent residence, which may be owned or rented by them". HESA's data also shows "provider maintained property" and "private sector halls" with similar proportions to our own data.

Our findings indicate that a large amount of students in Wales live in the PRS, either in a HMO or renting their own home alone or with a partner. In considering how we best empower students to support themselves and each other and how advice and advocacy organisations support students, this must be a key consideration.

How much do students pay?

A little over 40% of respondents placed themselves in the £91-£120 per week option, with around 34% of respondents saying they pay under £90 per week. This is a little different to findings from [Save the Student's National](#)

[Student Accommodation Survey](#) which suggests that the average weekly rent in Wales is £121.

Welsh students living in Wales but away from home, studying full-time at undergraduate level [will receive £10,350 of maintenance support](#) in the form of grants and loans depending on their household income. This works out to £862.50 per calendar month. [Save the Student's Average Student Living Costs](#) report suggests that the average student in the UK will spend around £795 per month, on a range of areas such as rent, groceries and course materials. However in this estimate, rent is costed at £418pcm, which sits towards the lower findings of our report.

This may go some way to explaining why over 30% of respondents to our survey cited affordability as one of the biggest problems they have with their student accommodation. It may also be why according to [UCAS](#) around 40% of students in their second year or above use paid work in addition to their student finance to pay for their accommodation. According to Save the Student's report, 50% of respondents "struggled to keep up with rent" payments.

Given that students and young people are disproportionately found working in less well paid, more [precarious work](#), this should be a key consideration for decision makers when looking to improve the experiences and lives of students in Wales.

Value for money?

Around 35% of respondents rated their accommodation as 'adequate' value for money, with around 25% saying it represents 'good' value for money and 15% saying 'very good.' This is in contrast to around 16% of students saying their accommodation is 'poor' value for money and around 7% saying 'very poor.' In Save the Student's report, 1 in 2 respondents say that their accommodation is 'poor value for money' – a decrease by as much as 10%.

KEY THEMES EXPLORED

While on the surface, the vast majority of students believe their accommodation to represent 'adequate' value for money or better, nearly 1 in 4 students who responded to our survey believed their accommodation was 'poor' or 'very poor' which should be of cause for concern. [Stats Wales data](#) for 2019/20 suggest that there were nearly 135,000 full-time students in higher education in Wales. If 1 in every 4 of these students perceive their accommodation to be 'poor' or 'very poor' then that would equate to around 33,750 students living in accommodation that was not even 'adequate' value for money. This number is around the same size as the entire population of [Aberdare](#) and around double the population of [Carmarthen](#).

A key question for decision makers in this space is whether they are prepared to accept such standards. And what options for recourse are available to students? Students who will often have little/no experience of living away from home and where or how to address issues related to their accommodation.

There are many parallels with the wider housing emergency in Wales, with rents rising beyond wage growth or for the many students who are unable to work, beyond their maintenance support. For students coming to Wales from other UK nations, with arguably less generous maintenance support, this is a further consideration.

What problems do students face in their accommodation?

It will come as no surprise to many that over half of our respondents identified damp and mould as an issue that they had faced in their student accommodation. Disrepair was the second most reported issue, with around 46% of respondents identifying this in their accommodation. As mentioned above, around 1 in 3 respondents said that affordability was an issue and 31% of respondents said that they had experienced problems with their landlord.

This is fairly reflective of the wider Shelter Cymru caseload, with dampness/disrepair, debt/money advice and landlord-related issues featuring persistently as common issues dealt with by our advice services throughout early 2021.

Other respondents cited Covid-related issues with their accommodation. One student renting in the PRS told us that their contract was "in place for September 2020 before COVID hit – the property was not needed due to closures and restrictions throughout the whole tenancy".

Another respondent living in university-owned halls said "Lack of use of services provided to us e.g. study rooms, common rooms, games room (even with covid, other uni owned accom have access to theirs)" and another student living in university-owned halls disclosed that "Contractors [were] wandering in and out without masks, especially in September, just walking into people's rooms without knocking". More students renting in the PRS spoke of the added pressure of lockdown and being confined in a small space, saying that they had "no outdoor space, very poor daylight" and another saying their "bedroom [is] too small without a window". These findings reinforce our [Life in Lockdown report](#) which found similar issues across Wales throughout the initial lockdown.

KEY THEMES EXPLORED

Looking further into some of the more prevalent issues, some of the examples of disrepair shared by respondents were alarming:



Broken tap, leaking shower, WiFi not working, broken door handle, broken bed post which I cut myself on, problem with the toilets flooding, heating not working.” – Student living in university-owned accommodation.



Boiler broke in winter and took months to get fixed. Washing machine broke, had dirty clothes for ages until it got replaced.” – Student renting in a HMO.



Appliances don't work, not all doors are fire doors, door didn't lock for months, broken extractor fan, bathroom smells like sewers, leaky ceilings, landlord gives bribes, boiler not been serviced recently, landlord does not respond to messages and sends his friends round to 'fix' things.” – Student renting in a HMO.

Estate agencies were a common theme in our responses, with several students suggesting that their estate agents contributed to drawn-out disrepair disputes, didn't seem to care about the student tenants and disregarded concerns raised to them. Some examples of responses are:



Rental agency doesn't care about the house or the conditions we live in.” – Student renting in a HMO.



Letting agents not responding.” – Student renting in a HMO.



Letting agency not notifying us of bills that weren't cancelled by previous tenants, so having to pay for months where we weren't in the house.” – Student renting in a HMO.



KEY THEMES EXPLORED

Where do students go to seek support?

Given the prevalence of issues seen above, we felt that it was important to ask where students go to seek support for issues in their accommodation. Our findings showed that:

- Over 50% of respondents would go to family or friends;
- Over 30% of students would seek advice from their students' union and a similar amount from their university or college;
- Only 22% of students said they would seek advice from Citizens' Advice and;
- Even fewer, 7% of students would seek support from Shelter Cymru.

This clearly represents a key challenge to overcome – understanding why students are not turning to free, independent and professional support services for their accommodation issues, and how this can be resolved.

Other findings from this question were:

- Around 24% of students would use online forums or social media to seek advice and support;
- 12% said that they would seek support from legal professionals;
- Under 10% said they would speak to their personal tutor or lecturer.

Given that significant numbers of students will speak to friends or family about issues, or approach their students' union or education provider – how can we better equip these groups to be able to support and signpost to professional support?

The knock-on effects of accommodation – why home is everything

Shelter Cymru believes that home is everything. Without good quality homes that are safe and secure, it is impossible to lead healthy, happy and productive lives. This is reflected in our findings, with a whopping 65% of respondents reporting that issues with their accommodation had affected their mental health and wellbeing.

Additional findings were:

- 35% of respondents said that issues with their accommodation had affected their physical health and wellbeing;
- 26% of respondents said that issues with their accommodation had affected their academic achievement;
- 24% said issues with their accommodation had affected relationships with their family or friends;
- 12% said that issues with their accommodation had affected their work or volunteering commitments.

One student living in a shared house said that they “Did an exam with a rat rustling in the cupboards” – adding to the picture of the 24% of respondents who reported pests and rodents as an issue with their accommodation.

The link between bad housing and poor health conditions, reduced productivity and education gaps are not new.

Shelter Cymru's Life in Lockdown report adds further context to many of the issues respondents illustrated to us. Having spent significant amounts of their time in accommodation throughout 2020 and 2021, it is perhaps to be expected that knock-on effects would be slightly elevated – however this does not make the situation any more acceptable for the thousands of students impacted.

Have students ever been pressured into signing a contract for accommodation without understanding it or having the time to consider other options?

A shocking 40% of respondents said that they had – at some point – felt pressure to sign an accommodation contract without understanding it, or before they had had time to consider their options.

These findings raise serious questions about the conduct of accommodation providers across

KEY THEMES EXPLORED

Wales. The housing emergency we are in has contributed to a hyper-pressurized housing market, where we are supporting thousands of people asked to pay significant amounts of rent in advance, who report properties are sold or let before they can view them and who are struggling to find a home.

UCAS's report on accommodation shows that over 25% of students in their second year or above secure their accommodation for the next academic year by December. Their research found that 18% of students in Cardiff had secured their accommodation for the next academic year by October – merely weeks into the academic calendar. Their results also showed that “almost 40% of first years were offered an incentive when looking for somewhere to live” – further showing the pressurised, market-driven housing sector.

We can also see that only 37% of final-year students intend on staying in Cardiff after graduation, one of the lowest in the survey – compared with 51% in Bristol, 52% in Manchester and 56% in Edinburgh. Only Nottingham retained fewer graduates, with 26% intending to stay. Could the housing emergency in Wales, and specifically Cardiff, be helping to contribute to this brain drain?

Whatever the reason, this behaviour is consistent with our findings on illegal evictions and [harassment](#), which have seen a significant increase in Wales in comparison to previous years. These trends show a level of conduct and behaviour which is unacceptable for tenants across the private rented sector – students or otherwise.

We asked students if they had the power to change one thing about student accommodation, what would it be and why
We grouped qualitative responses to this question thematically and noticed several distinct themes and areas that students

suggested they would change about their accommodation.

Money

A significant number of responses focussed on affordability and value for money. Many of the responses in this space were measured and well-balanced, suggesting that quality should be increased to provide better value for money and that prices should be reviewed to mitigate against profiteering and low standards.

There were also references to the unfair situation faced by so many students who paid for accommodation in advance and were then unable to use their accommodation in part or as a whole due to Coronavirus restrictions. Some examples are:



We are forced to live here in order to attend university but the price isn't even covered by the minimum Student Loan which is ridiculous.” – student living in purpose built, private student accommodation (PBSA).



Landlords take advantage of students because they know that they are desperate to find somewhere to live. Rents should be in line with the quality of the accommodation. Landlords should not be permitted to charge high rents for poor accommodation.” – student renting in the PRS.



I regularly have to rely on family/friends to give me food as I either pay rent and bills or buy food.” – student renting in a HMO.

There were several responses which specifically referenced the financial issues driven by the Covid-19 pandemic. Interestingly, these responses were mainly from the private rented sector, which could be a reflection of universities' decision to offer students

KEY THEMES EXPLORED

[rent rebates](#) which was less common in other forms of accommodation. The support packages put in place by the Welsh Government almost certainly allowed universities to do this, however this support was not then applied to other sectors of student accommodation, despite most students not living in university-owned accommodation.

Accountability and Recourse

A number of respondents chose to highlight issues around landlord/agent accountability and options – or lack thereof – for recourse. Respondents often directly linked their landlord and/or agent to issues they had faced with their accommodation and while the majority of responses in this area were from the PRS, issues with landlords were not exclusively within this sector. Some examples are:



The letting agents themselves, the landlords aren't that bad but communication with the letting agents it horrendous, they rarely sort things out." – student renting in a HMO.



Easy communication with a landlord, because ours take ages to get back to us, and never end up doing what they say anyway." – student renting in a HMO.



That landlords were held to a higher standard as most properties are in disrepair, forcing you to pay more for liveable conditions. Our previous property had a severe mould issue which was never fixed (along with other issues) which we never want to experience again as it caused so many issues for us, both socially and health-wise." – student living in the PRS.

A common suggestion was that educational providers could help to drive a preventative approach to poor landlords by recommending/supporting good landlords within their local

areas. Examples of this practice, whilst variable, do already exist in Wales such as:

- SAS Lettings, requiring landlords who wish to advertise their property(s) with Swansea University via StudentPad to register with proof of licences, safety certificates and submit to an inspection from the institution;
- Cardiff Student Letting operated by Cardiff University Students' Union, requires landlords who wish to have their property managed by CSL or to advertise via them to undertake a similar application process and provides useful context via their brochure and application process;
- Wrexham Glyndŵr University's Residential and Campus life team operate their StudentPad search engine, working with landlords who have been accredited with the 'Landlord Accreditation Wales Scheme certificate'.

What we see, is that practice and communication around non-university owned properties in Wales varies between each institution. What is also clear, is that in spite of the efforts being made in each location, persistent issues still remain – despite the controls and mitigations currently in place.

Landlord accountability and options for recourse are limited and anecdotally not well understood by students in Wales. A number of responses to our question advocated for a better understanding of the rules around student accommodation and a better awareness of how to challenge unfair practice – supported or otherwise.

Damp, Disrepair and Quality

Perhaps unsurprisingly, another common response focussed on the quality of student accommodation, particularly highlighting the more prevalent issues of damp and disrepair. As with the previous theme, these issues were spread across the various types of accommodation and not exclusive to one

KEY THEMES EXPLORED

particular sector.

Respondents shared particular concerns around the speed and desire to fix issues that they had reported with their accommodation, with the culture around the quality of student accommodation more widely, and having clear, enforceable standards that tenants can use to hold their accommodation providers to account. Some examples:



The buildings are never fixed, I know it's cheap but for the price I pay I would at least like the holes in my wall from decay to be fixed." – student renting in a HMO.



The need for some serious repairs in our campus is dire. There is mould in most buildings and the international students accommodation buildings are nearly falling apart. I specifically left our student accommodation because of the state of some of the buildings." – student renting in a HMO.



The main light in my bedroom has not worked for over a year despite contacting the landlord on multiple occasions." – student renting in a HMO.

There were several responses which spoke of a lack of urgency and sense of complacency in fixing issues with student accommodation – across all sectors. This culture of complacency was referenced within the wider responses to this question. Several students spoke of dealings with their accommodation provider and getting the impression that because they were students, there was almost an expectation that they should accept poorer conditions.

Signposting, help and support

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a number of students responded suggesting that better/easier to

access advice and support would be a positive change. Our findings on where students go to access support show that over half of our respondents would turn to friends and family. Their students' unions and education providers were also common avenues for support, however professional housing advice services such as Shelter Cymru and Citizens' Advice did not feature nearly as much.

Capacity, experience and expertise to support students in housing need varies across Wales. Students studying in HE providers are far more likely to be able to access support from their students' union or their education provider, however this support does vary across the sector. Students in other educational settings, such as FE and work-based learning are far less likely to be able to access support through a students' union or their provider.



For those in non-uni private housing there needs to be more of a support network from the uni and it feels as though you have no one to go to for any problems you have, if you can't speak to your landlord or letting agency. Also there are some serious problems with international students who are charged extortionate amounts of money by letting agencies for private house." – student renting in a HMO.



More support, more regulation, more information about rights. more university-run accommodation rather than private." – student living in the PRS.



Independent organisation that helped (especially international) students NOT to fall prey to useless rental agents and horrendous landlords." – student renting in a HMO.

KEY THEMES EXPLORED

International students' issues were more prevalent throughout this section, with a number of responses citing that better, more focussed support for international students would be a positive change.

A culture of complacency

Unfortunately, this is not a new problem. Since 2012 NUS has released a series of reports called Homes Fit for Study. Their [2014 report](#) looked into these issues and the then [Vice President Welfare said](#) that "there's a commonly held perception that poor quality student housing is a rite of passage, it is both disgusting and unacceptable that students should live in vermin infested housing in this day and age".

Yet, many respondents shared similar stories, suggesting that this culture of complacency still remains across Wales, in any of the differing types of student accommodation.



I feel they don't look after students. Student halls are always low standard." – student living in purpose built student accommodation.



Students are taken advantage of and it is assumed that they can be overcharged and palmed off e.g. not dealing with rodents or maintenance." – student renting in a HMO.



Just because we are students landlords seem to think we deserve to live in a damp house with various broken things." – student renting in a HMO.



Students are expected to live in awful living conditions just because it's 'the student way of living.'" – student renting in a HMO.



Too many landlords are able to get away with providing inadequate housing which is mouldy and broken at expensive rates and we have virtually no power to force them to change or improve the standard of housing available." – student renting in a HMO.

This culture seems to not only manifest itself in a complacency towards standards and quality, but several students reported aggression, rudeness and a sense of being taken advantage of, particularly within the PRS.



I would try and change the approach of lettings agencies' attitude towards the student population. They are condescending and rude, which has made my experience poor, but if they had respect for myself and my housemates as adults looking to rent, my experience would be far better." – student renting in a HMO.



Letting agencies know they can take advantage of people who are often renting their first house." – student renting in a HMO.



How useless, aggressive and manipulative a lot of letting agencies are because they take advantage of us." – student renting in a HMO.



For there to be higher standards of living. We had cracks in ever[y] single wall, including one in the living room that was big enough to see the street through. But when we had a council official come and check the state of the house they said it was one of the good ones and that we were lucky. It was unbearable in the winter! And when we complained to our landlord his response was that the heat was being lost from the floors (it was laminate throughout) and that we should 'get a rug.'" – student renting in a HMO.

CONCLUSIONS

This survey shows that there are a range of considerable issues with the student accommodation sector across Wales. Longstanding issues such as poor quality accommodation, affordability and financial implications and a culture of complacency around student accommodation have yet to be properly addressed.

It is no secret that even before the Covid-19 pandemic, Wales' universities were in a difficult position financially. There have been calls for [tuition fee increases](#) to help mitigate against these problems and a number of universities such as [Bangor University](#), [University of South Wales](#) and [Cardiff University](#) have undergone significant re-structures with the intention of saving money. Much of the difficulty has been apportioned to a '[very competitive market](#)' which makes it difficult for Welsh universities to compete with other UK counterparts.

One possible way to contribute to making Wales a more attractive place to study – and thereby helping to support our post-16 education sector – could be to ensure that student accommodation in Wales is as good as it can possibly be. By setting out to tackle some of the aforementioned issues and communicating this success to prospective students, the Welsh post-16 sector and Wales more widely has an opportunity to position itself in a unique space which will be attractive to more students.

The implications of bad student accommodation are only too real. Over 60% of respondents reporting that bad experiences with their accommodation impacted on their mental health and wellbeing, indicating a significant failing within the system. We know that bad mental health and wellbeing is an issue which has blighted too many students in Wales and beyond for too long, in spite of repeated government and education sector interventions. By ensuring that all students have a safe, secure and good quality place to call home, we can begin to fix part of

this puzzle.

In spite of the Welsh Government's changes to Student Finance Wales in the wake of the [Diamond Review](#), affordability and finances remain an issue for students in Wales. This may be, in part, due to students from other UK nations and beyond not being eligible for SFW funding. However as our brief breakdown on affordability earlier in the paper showed – affordability is likely to remain a key issue for students from Wales too. In particular, we know that students with protected characteristics will be more acutely affected by affordability. Students with disabilities are acutely likely to be disproportionately impacted, as shown by the EHRC's recent [report on Housing and Disabled People](#).

Perhaps key to making inroads into improving student accommodation though, is the changing of the culture which seems to pervade it. When asked what one thing they could change if they had the power, relating to student accommodation – we were struck by the amount of responses which simply asked for students to be treated the same as other renters:



For students to be respected as any other renting adult." – student renting in a HMO.



Just because we are students doesn't mean we should be treated differently to other adults." – student renting in the PRS.

This perceived rite of passage, that every student lives in a dodgy house and that it is part of the journey, is both unfair and untrue. The lack of empathy or sympathy that students feel when attempting to navigate the accommodation market may be as a result of a number of reasons. From people's memories of their time as students, to societal impressions or expectations or something else altogether.

CONCLUSIONS

Whatever the reason, it is clear that if we are serious about improving the experiences of students in Wales and their accommodation, then we need to change the culture surrounding student accommodation.



RECOMMENDATIONS

We believe the following set of recommendations can start the process of making the transformative change needed to address the issues noted in this report.

1. All students must have the same rights and protections regardless of where they live

The student housing market exists for students. Every student, regardless of their background or who their accommodation provider is, should have the same protections as any other student. The system must start from the student, not from the landlord.

2. All students must be able to hold their landlords to account

There must be proper accountability for providers who break the rules. Regardless of what sort of provider they are, they must all be held to the same standard and students must have simple and easy access to recourse.

3. All students must be able to afford to live in safe and healthy housing

Affordability is disappearing from the sector. The current system punishes those with the least and the amount of affordable housing is dropping year on year. Students shouldn't have to choose between mouldy flats and sky-high rents.

