
DURHAM\$U
PRIVATE RENTED
HOUSING SURVEY

This issue isn't going away. Student numbers are growing. House prices are rising. The quality of houses is dubious. There's an ever-growing culture of panic and pressure. We need a collective vision of how we want to tackle the private rental sector within Durham.

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INTRODUCTION

Student housing has been at the forefront of national student conversation over the last few years, with an extensive amount of research, campaigning and lobbying going on in the area. We want to challenge the misconception that students have a disregard for the condition of their homes and are happy to live in second-rate accommodation, and also shed light on the issues that students experience with landlords/ estate agents. In 2014, NUS published their 'Homes Fit for Study' report, which highlighted housing issues that students face across the country, including cost of accommodation, problems with properties and an 'early signing culture'. Five years on, NUS have released the 3rd Edition of this report and once again the predominant issues found were affordability, a culture of early signing and multiple instances of students feeling ill-equipped to effectively tackle problems during their tenancies. As Eva Crossan Jory (NUS VP Welfare) states, "Overpriced and low-quality housing is not a rite of passage for students, it is the inevitable outcome of a sector poorly regulated and where legislation is rarely enforced".¹

Unfortunately, these issues are all too familiar for many Durham students. At the SU, we have heard first-hand from students the impact that poor quality, unaffordable housing can have on student experience. Our concerns have been reflected in the numerous articles published by Palatinate, which have highlighted the Durham 'housing rush' and 'panic', reporting on students camping out overnight to sign contracts at the earliest possible opportunity, as well as students

being "belittled, patronised and exploited" by landlords. This year, the housing situation in Durham seems to have reached an all-time low, leading Purple Radio to launch an investigation into the private rental sector within Durham.

As an SU, we are committed to promoting students' wellbeing, and recognise the importance of good quality, affordable housing for all. This is why housing is a key part of our strategy and why we will continue to work to improve students' experiences in this area. However, in order for us to do this, we needed to build a strong understanding of what students' experiences actually are. We launched the Durham Private Rented Housing Survey at the end of 2018, to help us build a picture of what the main issues are for you, as students in Durham, and how we can use our influence as a Union to make change.

The findings of the survey are outlined throughout this short report, and from these I have made several recommendations for what I think the next steps are in tackling the issues.

Finally – a big thank you to all those who took the time to complete the survey! Your responses are invaluable in helping us to understand your experiences and where we can go from here.

Meg Haskins
SU Welfare and Liberation Officer, 18/19

¹ NUS Homes Fit for Study Report 2019. Available at: <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/homes-fit-for-study-document>

WHAT WE DID

The online survey was open to all Durham University students between November 2018 and January 2019. The survey consisted of 6 parts, which sought to explore all areas of the private rental sector in Durham. These were:

- About you as a student
- About your search for accommodation and your contract
- About your accommodation
- About your renting experience
- About your finances and budgeting
- About improvements.

When advertising the survey, there was a prize draw of £200 worth of Amazon vouchers to encourage responses (2x £50 and 10 x £10). In total, the survey received **518 responses**.

85.7% were from Undergraduate (UG) students; **9.1%** were from Postgraduate Research (PGR) students; **4.8%** were from Postgraduate Taught (PGT) students and the remaining **0.4%** were foundation level students.

Further demographic information about the sample includes:

- **84.9%** of respondents were aged 17-22, **11.8%** were 23-29, **2.3%** were 30-39, **0.4%** were 40+ and **0.6%** preferred not to say.
- **80.9%** were UK citizens, **10.8%** were international students from outside of the EU/EEA and **7.3%** from an EU/EEA country, **0.6%** preferred not to say and **0.4%** selected 'Other'.
- **98.1%** were full-time students

WHAT WE FOUND

This section outlines the key findings of the housing survey and is followed by conclusions and recommendations.

Finding somewhere to live

Starting your search

Respondents to the survey were asked which month they began their search for private rented accommodation. With **22% beginning their search in October**, and a further **35.9% starting in November**, it's clear that Durham has a serious issue with early house hunting. Indeed, when compared to the Save the Students (2019)² national survey, where it was found that only 15.8% of students who were moving began searching before November and 23.7% began their search in November, the scale of Durham's issue becomes even more apparent.

Unsurprisingly, this culture led to the majority of students who were currently living in private rented accommodation to report that they felt pressured to secure a

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

A property is a HMO if at least three unrelated tenants live there and if you share a toilet, bathroom or kitchen.

If your home is a HMO, your landlord has extra legal responsibilities to ensure tenants have adequate facilities.

property, with **41.1% saying that this pressure was driven by other students.**

A large number of respondents selected multiple factors, such as other students, uncomfortable marketing techniques and pressure from landlords or agents, as also contributing to this culture of pressure.

What's important to students?

Respondents were asked to rank which factors influenced their housing search, from most to least important. The following rankings are demonstrative of how each factor was commonly ranked.

Most important:

- 1. Price of Accommodation** (most important for **37.3%**)
- 2. Condition of accommodation** (2nd for **22.2%**; top 2 for **48.6%**)
- 3. Convenient proximity to University, College or Department** (3rd for **13.7%**; top 3 for **53.9%**)

Least Important:

- 9. The safety of the neighbourhood** (9th for **22.9%**; bottom 3 for **38%**)
- 10. Cost of agency fees** (10th for **19.9%**; bottom 3 for **50%**)
- 11. Reputation of landlord or agent** (11th for **18.5%**; bottom 3 for **57%**)

WHAT YOU SAID

"The pressure to find houses so early in Durham is a huge issue"

"Sorting housing for next year was extremely stressful. There is a huge amount of pressure to sign a house early..."

² Save the Students (2019). National Student Accommodation Survey. Available at:

<https://www.savethestudent.org/accommodation/national-student-accommodation-survey-2019.html>

Living in your rented home

Property problems

Respondents were asked about any issues they have experienced whilst privately renting accommodation, whether this be with their property or their landlord or agent. The most often-cited issues that students have encountered were **mould on windows and walls (45%)**, **draughty windows or doors (43.2%)**, **unwanted items left from previous tenants (40%)** and **faulty or missing appliances (37.6%)**. Additionally, **16.2%** of respondents had experienced a pest or insect infestation.

Respondents were also asked about how **comfortable** their accommodation was during colder months.

48% of respondents said they **had to wear extra clothing** inside their accommodation to keep warm.

29% said that heat escaped through **poor insulation or draughty windows**.

29.3% felt they could not put the heating on **due to cost**.

WHAT YOU SAID

“Everyone I know had some issues with their renting process (for me repairs not being done in a reasonable time frame)”

“Too many students are taken advantage of”

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

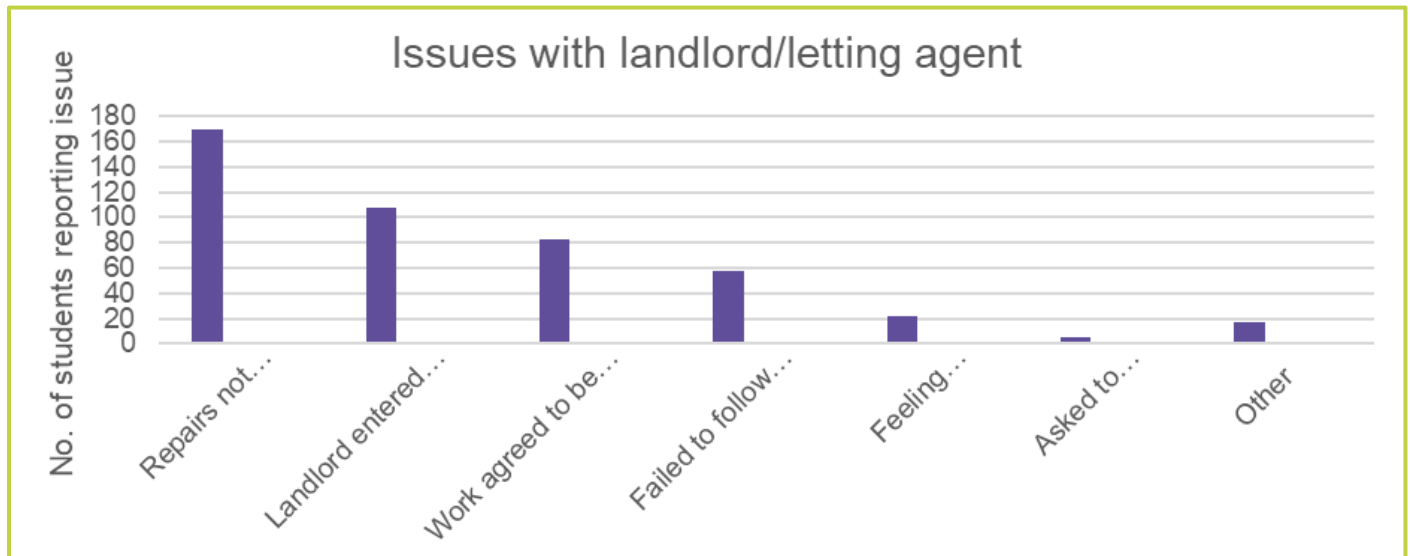
As a tenant, you have the right to live in a property that’s safe and in a good state of repair.

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

The Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018 came into force in March 2019 and states that a property must be fit for human habitation at the beginning of the lease and during the whole term of the lease.



Landlord or Agent Issues



32.8% said that repairs had not been carried out in a reasonable timeframe.

21% said their landlord or agent had **entered their property without prior notice**, which is a breach of their rights as tenants under the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985.

22 respondents said they felt **threatened or harassed** by their landlord or agent.

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

The Landlord and Tenant Act 1985 states that a landlord can only enter a property at reasonable times of the day AND if they have given at least 24 hour notice in writing.

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

Your landlord is responsible for most major repairs, and these must be completed within a 'reasonable timeframe'.

WHAT YOU SAID

"Dealing with the estate agent has been difficult. I find them inflexible and they often ignore my emails and requests for issues with the property"

"The biggest issue is the attitude of the letting agent... they were rude and treated me as though I was a nuisance..."

Respondents were asked whether issues with accommodation (such as those identified above) had contributed to poor health.

Of significant concern is that **15%** said that accommodation issues had **made them feel mentally unwell** (i.e. feelings of low mood, depression, anxiety).

Additionally, 20 respondents felt that accommodation issues had **made an existing health problem worse**, and a further 18 said that accommodation issues had **created a new health problem**.

Budgeting and Finance

A series of questions were asked to gain an insight into how students budget for and finance private rented accommodation, and what the monthly cost is for privately renting in Durham.

Respondents were asked what proportion of their monthly income was spent on rent.

42.3% of respondents were not sure. Amongst those who did know, the most frequent response was between **41-60%** (17.7% of all responses).

10% spends **81-100%** of their monthly income on rent.

Participants were also asked how they finance their accommodation and could choose multiple answers from a list of common options.

61.2% receive financial **support from their parents** compared to the national average of 46%³

58.3% use a **student loan**

34.7% use income from a **part time job**

29.2% use **savings**

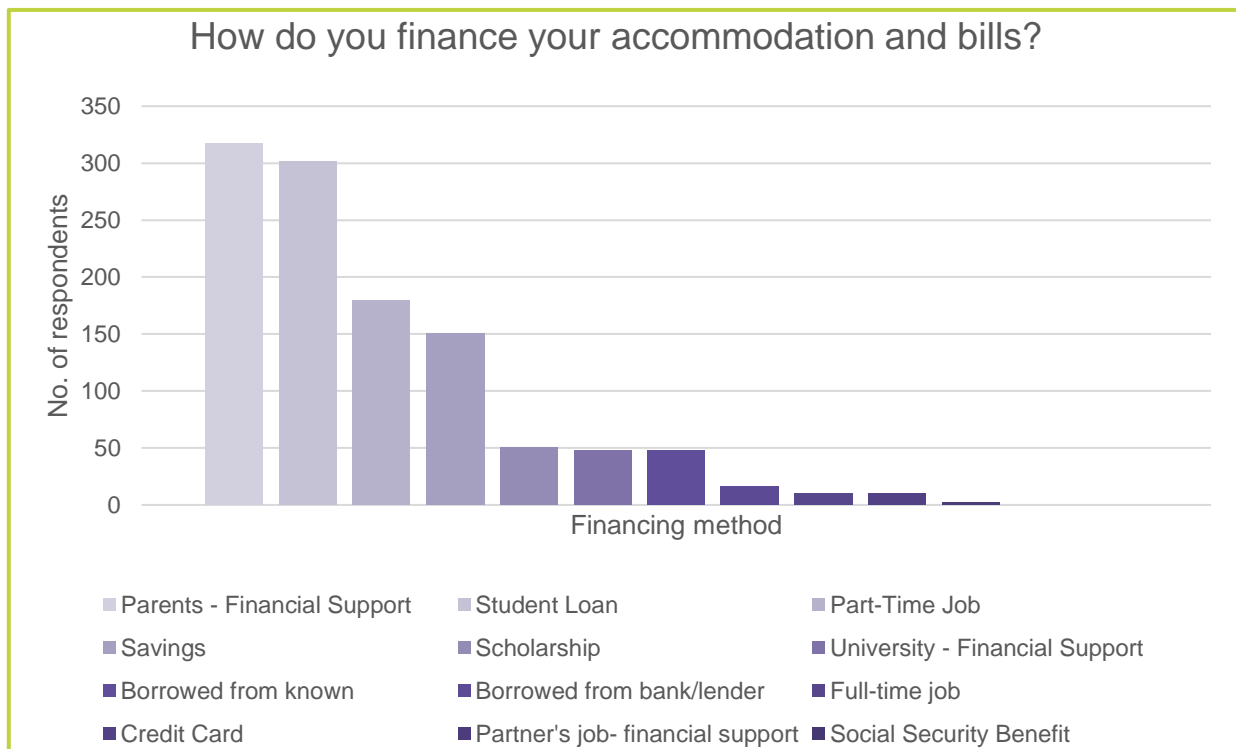
Respondents were also asked about any measures they had taken to make rent or bill payments whilst at University. It was found that a number of sacrifices were made by students including:

42% had reduced their spending on **hobbies and entertainment**.

35% had reduced spending on **food**.

29% had avoided travelling to see **family and friends**.

21.6% had **cancelled or avoided participation** in student group events or activities which may require extra fees.



³ Save the Student (2019). National Student Accommodation Survey.

This issue of cost and finances was a reoccurring theme throughout the responses received.

WHAT YOU SAID

“The cost of accommodation has increased so much this year... our landlords are trying to charge us 22% more than last year. We had to search high and low for affordable property.”

“Why does the price increase every single year? [...] Can you stop them from exploiting us?”

“Lower college fees would have a knock on effect of reducing fees for private accommodation”

UG v PG – Was there a difference?

During the analysis, the data was also split to allow for comparisons between **PG** and **UG** respondents. Unfortunately, the sample size for PG respondents was disproportionately small (n=72), so the findings are unlikely to be representative of the whole PG student body. However, it was felt that it was still useful to include the differences observed.

One notable difference was seen in the way UG and PG students ranked the **importance** of factors which influenced their housing search. Though the top four factors were the same for both groups (Price; Condition; Proximity to University, College or Department; Amenities in Accommodation), it was found that the **condition of accommodation** was the

most important factor for **37.5%** of **PG** students, with **price** in the top 2 for **58.3%**. Comparatively, the **price of accommodation** was the **most important** factor for **38.1%** of **UG** students, with **condition** in the top 2 for **46.7%**.

Additionally, **PG** students felt that **safety** (ranked **5th**) was more important than **size** (ranked **11th**), whilst the opposite was true for **UG** students (ranking these **9th** and **5th** respectively).

In response to the question ‘**Who do you live with?**’, over **90%** of both second and third year **UGs** said they live with friends in shared accommodation, whilst this figure was **21.7%** for **PGT** students and **34.8%** for **PGR** students. Conversely, **PGT** students were more likely to live alone (**34.8%**) or with strangers in shared accommodation (**34.8%**) whilst **26.1%** of **PGR** students said they live with a partner or family members.

Improving the Private Rental Sector

The final section of the survey aimed to gain an understanding of how we at Durham SU may be able to improve the experience of privately renting in Durham.

Participants were asked to rate how satisfied they are overall, with their experience of renting private accommodation as a student in Durham. Of those who were living in private rented accommodation at the time of the survey:

- 4.8%** were **very satisfied**
- 48.3%** were **satisfied**
- 28%** were **dissatisfied**
- 11.4%** were **very dissatisfied**

Respondents were also asked:

“Which of the following do you think would contribute to making your accommodation search and renting experience better?”

62% selected an **online rating scheme for landlords**

54.2% welcomed more pressure from **local politicians** around renting issues

32.2% asked for more **advice** for renters from the **SU**

36.1% selected more **advice** for renters from the **University**

WHAT YOU SAID

“More legal advice would be helpful and a rating scheme is by far the best possible option when it comes to making informed decisions while still having as much choice as possible”

“I would like more information from the Uni. I did not receive any support from the Uni with finding private rented accommodation”

“A detailed rating system for both landlords and individual properties is a really good idea... it would also give landlords an incentive to treat tenants better...”

WHERE WE'RE GOING FROM HERE

The Housing Search

Many student renters are engulfed by a culture of panic and pressure when searching for housing, leading to them signing properties that fall below legal requirements. **62%** of respondents said that an online rating scheme for landlords would make the accommodation search and renting experience better.

Consequently, we have visited Leeds University Union and Hull University Union to discuss how they implemented **landlord rating schemes**, with a view to introduce the scheme in Durham for the 2020/2021 academic year. This will give students a platform to publicly shame rogue landlords and serve to warn prospective tenants away from their properties, whilst also rewarding good landlords. It will create a shared community of experience with the aim of eradicating lower standard properties across the city, thereby improving the overall quality of private rented housing.

Over half of all respondents said that they began their search for private rented accommodation in November or earlier.

WHAT YOU SAID

“An online rating scheme such that people can make more informed decisions is the best possible solution by far.”

This culture of early house hunting and pressure amongst students is contributing to additional, unnecessary stress by creating a panic-fuelled housing rush.

We want to **challenge** this culture and **create change**. We want to **push back when houses are released for signing**, so that students have more time to make informed decisions about where they will live and who with. We know that this will take time, cooperation from agents and students and prolonged effort, but we are committed to improving the renting experience for Durham students.

Property Conditions

WHAT YOU SAID

“Is there some way to take the pressure off for signing a house so early? [...] It puts pressure on students to accept climbing prices and poor quality houses without having time to search properly.”

The picture in Durham is reflective of the national picture. The quality of student housing is poor, with an unacceptably large proportion of students experiencing issues such as damp, mould, draughts, faulty or missing appliances and unwanted leftover items.

We want to re-establish our relationship with ACORN – **a tenants' union** which stands against rising housing costs and unacceptable conditions. This will allow students to **collectively drive change** by calling out 'bad' landlords and standing up for their rights as tenants.

We will also continue to invest in **the SU's Advice Service**, so that we can carry on providing support, guidance and resources to students who have negative experiences in private rented accommodation. **Students need to know their rights** and currently many do not.

Though not addressed in this survey, the SU has also been made aware of the absence of affordable, accessible accommodation throughout the Durham private rented sector.

We will continue working with the Students with Disabilities Association, to lobby the University to make accessibility a priority when considering their accommodation provision, as well as to ensure that students with accessibility requirements have suitable and affordable options.

Housing Costs

The rising cost of college accommodation is aiding the rise of costs across the private renting sector, meaning that large numbers of students in Durham are relying on financial support from their parents or income from a part-time job to pay their accommodation fees. Furthermore, financial constraints are causing a large proportion of students to reduce their spending on participation in the wider student experience in Durham.

We must continue to **lead and invest in the #RippedOff campaign**, to further demonstrate our opposition to rising college costs.

We must continue to lobby the University and local businesses to commit to paying the living wage, so that students who do work are paid fairly.

We must also continue to lobby for the University to revisit the criteria for the Student Support fund (formerly the Hardship fund), so that **all** students have the opportunity to participate in the wider student experience which Durham offers, and takes pride in.

Rights of Renters

Students want, and need, to know their rights as a tenant. **32.2%** of respondents asked for more advice from the SU.

We want to make our advice more easily available to all Durham students. Therefore, knowing that students are most often engaged with their colleges, we will continue to **develop stronger relationships with colleges**, so that they are equipped with appropriate materials and resources to share with students regarding their rights.

WHAT YOU SAID

"I hate to think what future students will have to deal with as even more students move to Durham. Everyone I know had some issues with their renting process"

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