

Durham SU and Durham University

Housing Survey Results



November 2024

Introduction

Durham students living in quality, affordable housing is an objective of Durham SU's 'Tackle big issues that hold students back' strategic goal. A previous report has been produced by Durham University about student accommodation demand, with one of the resultant recommendations being the introduction of an annual survey to keep track of the Durham housing situation. This housing survey with students in Durham, intended to be the first in this series of annual surveys, was subsequently commissioned in order to depict the experience of student tenants across Durham and inform action under this strategic goal.

The survey was intended to gather data on a number of factors relating to the experience of students living in private rental accommodation in Durham city. It included questions about contracts, the cost of accommodation, relationships with landlords and/or property agent, and suitability of accommodation. The primary audience of interest was those renting in the city and it did not include students living in college accommodation, students living in Durham city in non-rental accommodation, or students commuting in from outside Durham whose experiences are likely very different.

Methodology

A survey was designed to investigate the landscape of student housing in Durham city by an external agency in conjunction with Durham SU. Fieldwork for the survey was conducted between June and October of 2024. Data collection took place via an online survey that was promoted via a range of means, including the Students' Union's website, emails, flyers, social media, and digital signage.

The survey was launched on 14th June 2024 to avoid overlap with the University's Wider Student Experience Survey. This was one week before the end of term 3, when many students had already left Durham, and the survey was open primarily outside of term time. While the survey did reach over 700 students, it resulted in low levels of completed responses.

In total, there were 264 complete responses to the survey. 24 responses were then removed due to living outside the area of scope for this research or living in a house they own (outright or with a mortgage). In total, 240 respondents were included within our analysis of the survey. Demographic breakdowns of the sample can be found [here](#).

The sample was broadly representative of the University's population in terms of level of study. Those studying at an undergraduate level (76% in this survey, compared to 79% of the University population) and at postgraduate taught level (10% in this survey, compared to 13% of the University population) were broadly in line with the overall population, however the survey slightly overrepresented postgraduate researchers (14% in this survey, compared to 7% of the University population). Given the survey focused on private renting, however, it would be expected that the rates of postgraduate researchers would be higher. International students were slightly underrepresented in the survey (19% in this survey, compared to 31% of the University population).

Alterline were commissioned following this to support Durham SU and Durham University with analysis of the data collected and to produce a report on its findings. This report details these findings and includes key statistics, quotes and images provided through the survey. Please note that any major typographical errors in student quotes have been corrected, however, any other spelling or grammatical mistakes have not been edited out.

Key summary

Finding and securing a property

Affordability was top of mind for students when they looked for a property to rent. However, substantial numbers of respondents felt that they did not have a choice in where to live. This was driven by the culture of perceived competition for student housing in Durham which students felt was generated by the University, landlords and letting agents and the media. This led to students looking for accommodation early in the academic year, for the following academic year, and spending short periods doing so. Further, the lack of affordable options available, competition for housing, and challenges arranging viewings and signings made securing a property difficult.

Experiences while living in accommodation

While the majority of participants said that their accommodation had adequate space and was in good condition, the majority did not think it was good value for money. Over four in ten respondents said their accommodation was not in good condition and nearly seven in ten reported at least one issue with their accommodation. Mould, and conditions which would lead to mould, were the most commonly reported issues across participants, and undergraduates were more likely to experience these. The most frequent complaints that students reported making to their landlord were about mould and appliance faults, and there was widespread dissatisfaction with how complaints were handled.

There were high levels of uncertainty surrounding where to go for support with housing needs. Family and friends are the most common source of housing support, with very few students saying they had used official sources of advice and guidance.

Impact of housing on students

Students described being unable to focus on their studies due to stress related to their housing conditions. Some students also said that they had taken time off university due to the negative impact this had on their wellbeing. The home environment was sometimes considered inappropriate to study in, and participants reported avoiding spending time in their homes.

Administration and finances

Use of guarantors was common, particularly for undergraduate students, but this requirement was challenging for international students to meet. While nearly one in ten reported unexpected fees at the point of securing their property, answers indicate that this was mainly made up of requirements to pay tenancy deposits and contributions to the first month of rent. Personal savings were used to fund deposit payments by over half of students surveyed. Most respondents reported that their deposit was contained in a deposit protection scheme, but there was widespread lack of awareness of whether this was the case and where it was held.

Student loans and money given by friends, family and partners were used by the majority of respondents to finance their rent and bills. Postgraduate students reported administrative challenges associated with paying council tax. Almost one in five respondents noted unfair deposits for cleaning, rubbish removals, replacement of appliances and garden work.

Recommendations

Recommendations for the Students' Union

Develop a comprehensive housing communications campaign spanning the academic cycle

Expand on current communication campaigns, in conjunction with the University, to ensure students understand the private rental market, are aware of housing issues, and know where to access support, with specific messages around:

- The best times of year to be looking for housing and signing a contract
- Expected costs when signing up to a house, including how deposits are calculated
- Specific information about deposits and guarantors, including tailored information for international students
- What the Durham University Code of Practice is and what it means for students
- The range of support on offer to students and how to access this
- What support is on offer specifically for dealing with complaints and how it can help
- Specific support available to students regarding council tax, aimed predominantly at postgraduates.

Ensure information, guidance and support is designed to meet students where their mindset is

Any campaigns, support, information and guidance must be designed with the understanding that students accessing these at the point of making housing choices are in a panicked state, fearful and under pressure - and likely to make decisions quickly.

Consider how peer voices can be used to support students making housing choices

As well as engaging across a number of local bodies, ensuring the voices of students can be heard to provide peer-to-peer insight and assurance would be a powerful way of combatting pervasive myths around student housing.

Campaign for changes to student finance

Campaign for changes to student finance which ensure that maintenance loans keep up with inflation.

Examine practices regarding energy caps to ensure these are set at appropriate levels

Further investigation of energy limits imposed by landlords should be conducted to determine whether practices of setting these lower than is needed to keep a warm home are widespread.

Continue monitoring the student housing situation

Continue work to examine the housing situation in Durham through similar surveys in the future. Ensure that response rates are improved through reviewing the timing of the survey to reach students within term time but also at an appropriate point within their housing cycle. Refinement of the question set may also help improve retention through the survey by ensuring that questions are relevant, understandable and concise.

Recommendations for the University

Provide cost-of-living support to students

Cost-of-living support, aimed at supporting those who are unable to afford their heating, may be beneficial to prevent the negative impacts of living and studying in cold homes.

Ensure appropriate space is available on campus for students to spend time

In the short term, appropriate space on campus for students who are trying to find a warm place to study or relax should be provided and maintained to give students respite from the conditions in poor quality accommodation. Library spaces, which are well staffed and resourced, are ideal for this, particularly if they have 24/7 opening hours.

Reinstate international student guarantor programme

Reintroduce a university-backed guarantor scheme specifically designed to support international students. This program should provide a cost-free, transparent alternative to private guarantor services, removing financial barriers and administrative complexities for international students seeking accommodation.

Conduct a comprehensive market impact assessment

Develop an assessment that examines the University's role in influencing student housing and the broader ecosystem. This should investigate how key actors, including the University, local landlords, letting agents, and the local authority, contribute to the current housing culture in Durham.

Consider how housing can be scaled to match recruitment ambitions

The University should consider how its student recruitment relates to Durham's housing capacity and work in partnership with local bodies to ensure that any increase in student numbers is matched by affordable bed spaces, improved housing quality and stable or reduced market prices.

Recommendations for other local actors

Consider how local bodies can work together to create culture change around housing choices

A co-ordinated effort between Durham SU, Durham University, the local authority and lettings agents is likely to be the most effective at bringing about true cultural change surrounding housing choices.

Relaunching a student housing accreditation scheme

Evaluate the previous Landlord Assurance scheme and establish an updated and comprehensive accreditation framework for student accommodation that sets clear quality standards beyond current licensing requirements. This scheme should include mandatory annual property inspections and create a transparent mechanism for evaluating and maintaining housing quality, providing students with a reliable benchmark for selecting accommodation.

Consider licensing to drive up quality standards

The scale of reported issues within student housing may fall within the scope of additional licensing for landlords operating in the student market to drive up quality standards.

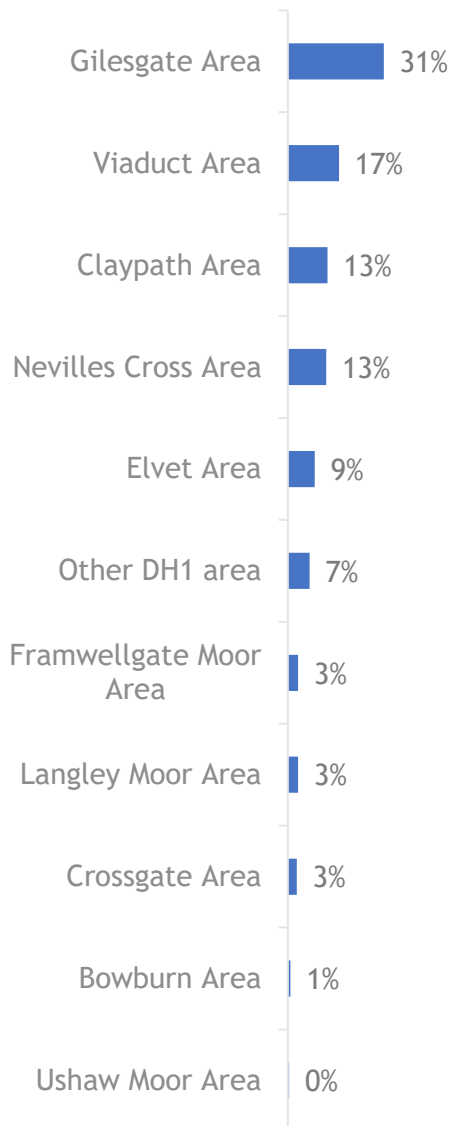
Housing Survey Results



Where are survey respondents living and who are their property agents?

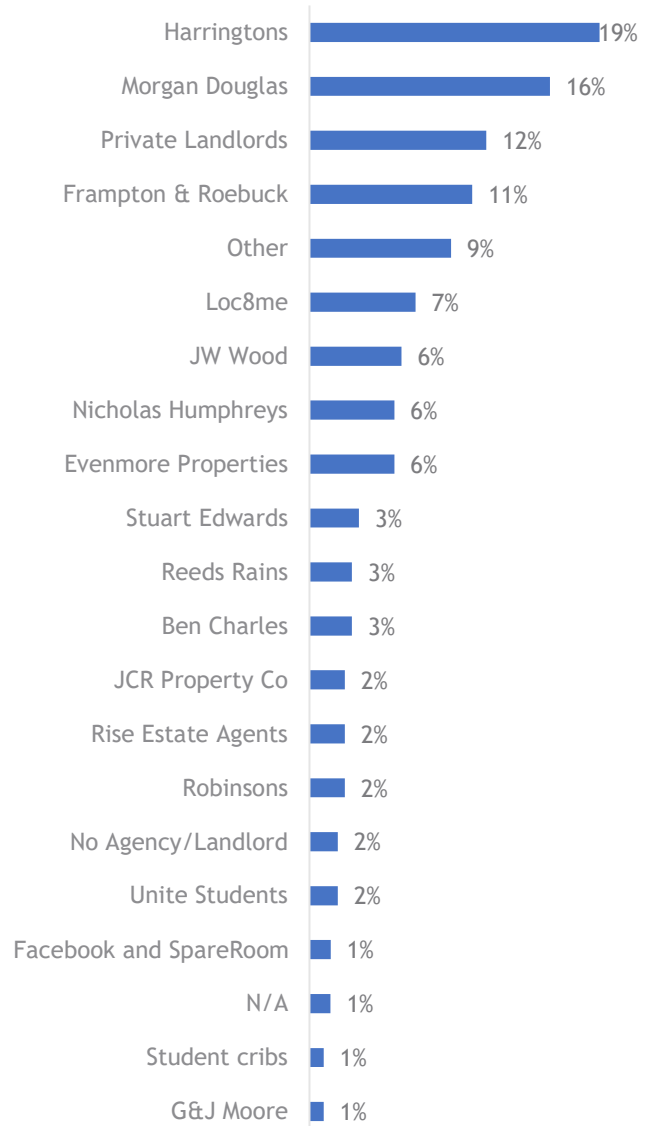
The area in which the greatest proportion of participants lived is Gilesgate (31%). This was followed by the Viaduct area (17%), Claypath and Nevilles Cross (both 13%). Students referenced experience across a range of different landlords, with no one landlord reaching large proportions of students. The most frequently selected property agent that participants were either currently using or had used in the past was Harringtons, who had been used by 19% of participants. This was followed by Morgan Douglas (16%) and private landlords (12%).

Areas represented in the sample. Base: All respondents (240)



Agents used either currently or previously by participants.

Base: All respondents who provided a response (217)



There was widespread uncertainty around whether landlords or property agents are signed up to the Durham University Student Lettings Code of Practice. 86% of participants reported that they were not sure if their landlord was a signatory. Only 8% of participants reported that their landlord/property agent was signed up and 6% reported that they weren't.

Recommendations

Develop a comprehensive housing communications campaign spanning the academic cycle

There were low levels of awareness of whether landlords are a signatory of the University's Code of Practice: only 14% of participants knew if their landlord had or had not signed the Code. The Students' Union should expand on current communication campaigns, in conjunction with the University, to ensure students understand the private rental market, are aware of housing issues, and know where to access support, with specific messages around what the Durham University Code of Practice is and what it means for students.

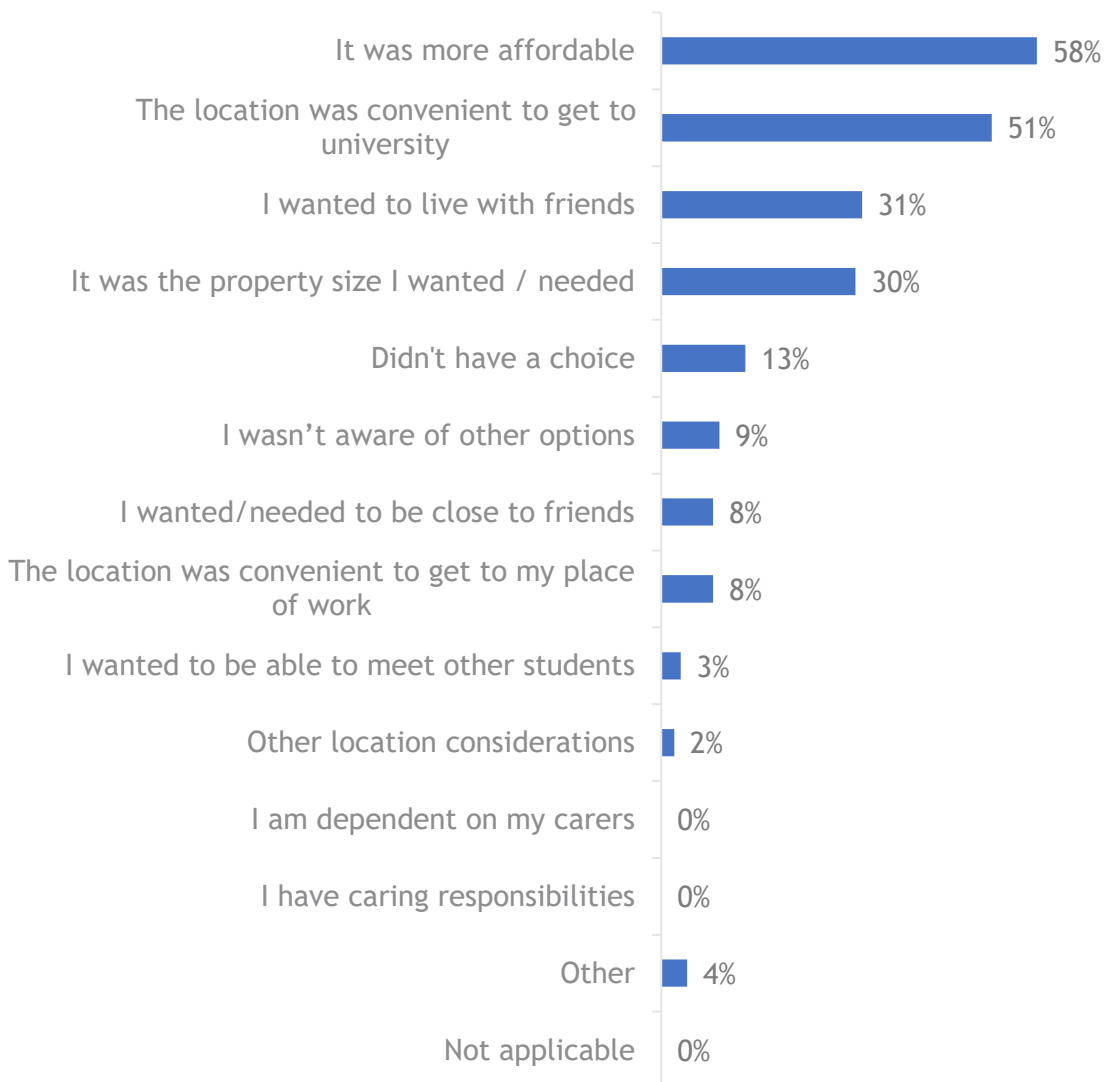


Finding and securing a property

Affordability was top of mind for students when they looked for a property to rent.

The factor that most frequently influenced students' decisions about where to rent was affordability; 58% reported this as one of their top three factors that influenced their choice of property. This was followed by the convenience of the location for getting to university (51%). Living with friends was selected by 31% of respondents, closely followed by getting the size of property they wanted/needed which was selected by 30% of respondents.

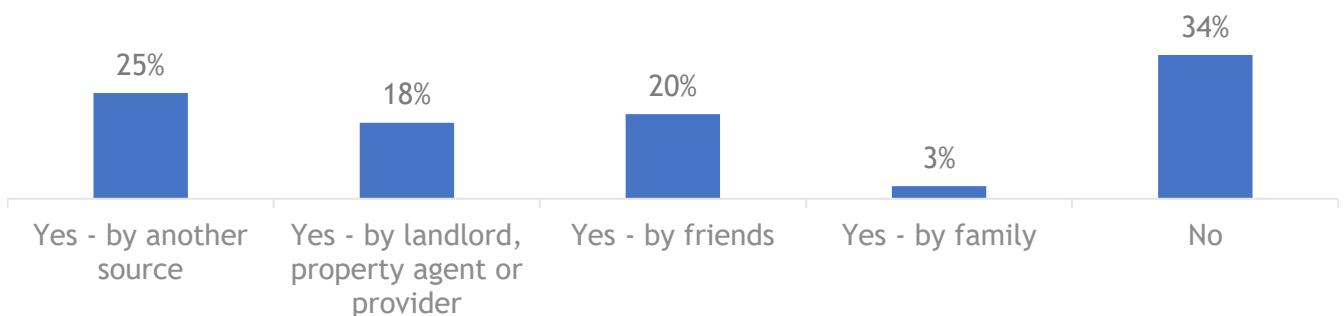
Top three factors chosen by respondents which influenced their housing choices. Base: All respondents (240)



However, substantial numbers of respondents felt that they did not have a choice in where to live.

Nearly two-thirds of participants (66%) reported that they felt pressured into signing a contract. When asked who they felt pressured by, students most frequently reported that they felt the most pressure from another source (25%), followed by pressure from friends (20%), from a landlord or property agent (18%), and from family (3%). This corresponds with findings that 13% of students said the main reason they selected their accommodation was because they had no other choice and 9% who said the main reason they selected their accommodation was because they weren't aware of any other options.

Main sources of pressures to sign a contract reported by respondents. Base: All respondents (240)



This was driven by the culture of perceived competition for student housing in Durham which students felt was generated by the University, property letting agents and the media.

Those who selected that they felt pressured by another source gave a multitude of reasonings which generally pointed to a culture of fear around (actual or perceived) limited availability of student housing in Durham. This played on time pressure to secure accommodation immediately or risk paying more for lower quality accommodation or, worse, have nowhere to live the following year. Students rarely pinpointed the exact source of this; instead, this appeared to come from a multitude of places which perpetuated an environment of “*competition with other students interested in the same houses*” (undergraduate student living in Nevilles Cross). Sources which were referenced included older students recounting how they secured accommodation, the University, landlords and property agents, and the media’s coverage of the housing crisis.

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The university and estate agents pressure students to feel like they need to get housing fairly immediately once term starts which makes it seem like there's a shortage and you need to rush into housing when neither of these are true.

Undergraduate student living in Gilesgate, signed contact in October - December 2023



There was pressure to get a contract signed or risk not having accommodation for the next year. The frenzy of students searching made it seem very urgent.

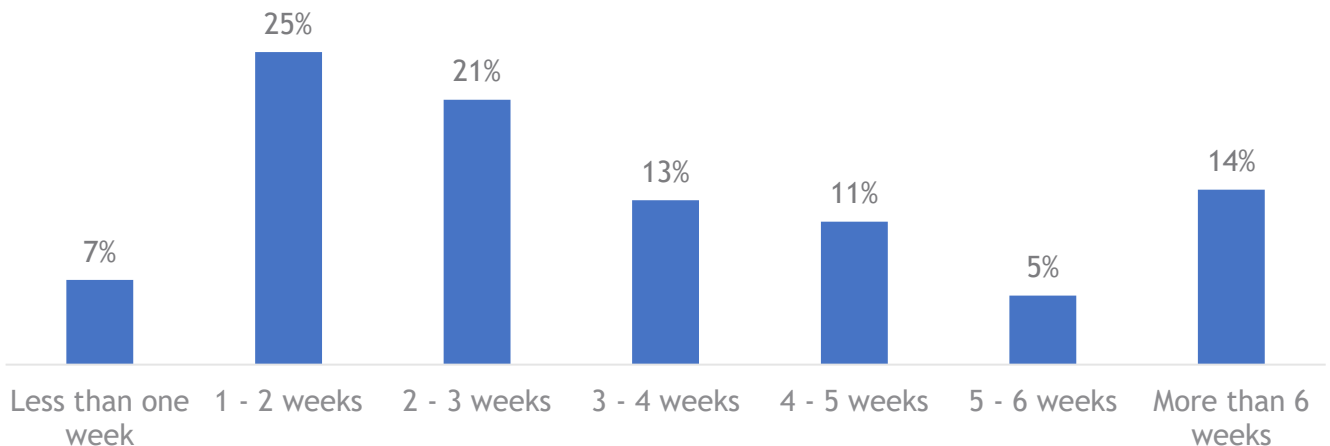
Undergraduate student living in Gilesgate

Undergraduate students were more likely to have felt pressured into signing their contract than postgraduate students. Among undergraduates, 72% reported that they had felt pressured, compared to 48% of postgraduate students. They additionally were more likely to have spent 2 weeks or under searching (39%) as compared to postgraduate students (9%), and to have signed their contract between October and December 2023 (64% compared to 10% of postgraduate students) highlighting that the pressures at this time of year are particularly acute for students at this study level.

This led to students looking for accommodation early in the academic year, for the following academic year, and spending short periods doing so.

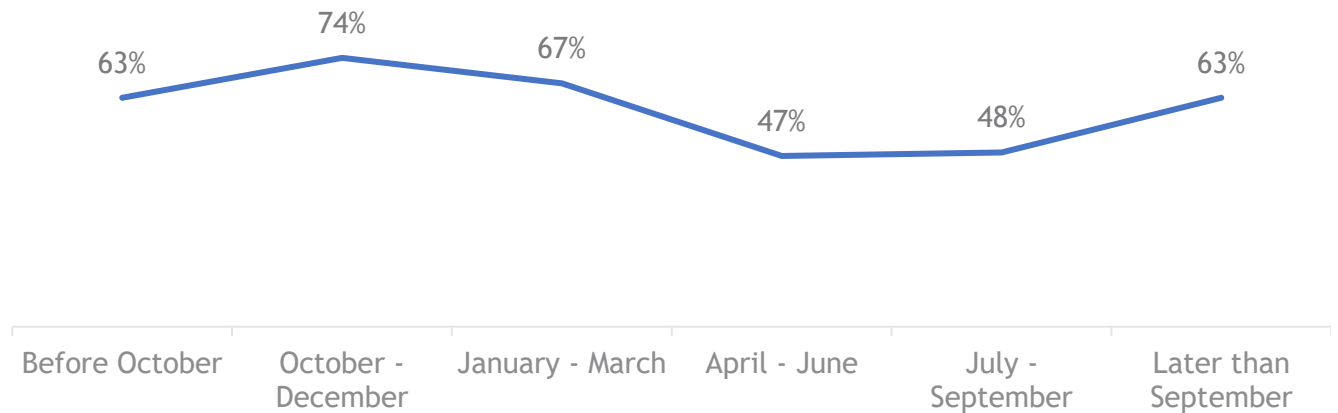
Nearly one third (32%) of students spent less than 2 weeks searching for housing and over half of students' searches (53%) were over within 3 weeks. Students who signed their contract between October and December were more likely to have spent between 1 and 2 weeks on their search; 37% of students signing their contract in this time spent this amount of time on this process, again pointing to the environment for housing searches being more pressurised during this time.

Length of time respondents spend on their housing search. Base: All respondents (240)



Time was very often cited as a reason for feeling pressure and, in particular, that students would run out of time to secure a property. However, the data suggests that this is students' perception of time rather than there being an actual lack of time. Feeling pressured was highest amongst those who signed in October to December for the following year and declined over time, with a spike for those signing later than September for an immediate contract.

Proportion of students reporting feeling pressured to sign a contract at different time points. Base: All respondents (240)



It is worth noting that those who signed up before October may include people who signed a contract for longer than one year, which may be why they feel less pressure.

Students said the lack of affordable options available, competition for housing, and challenges arranging viewings and signings made securing a property difficult.

The pressure that students feel over the housing search is something that also emerged in the open-ended responses about the difficulties they faced when searching for a rental property. The difficulties students most frequently mentioned were affordability and pricing (54%), housing availability and competition (38%), and difficulties with viewings and signings (16%). Other issues that created challenges for students when they searched for properties were the location of properties and their proximity to the university (12%), the suitability of properties for individual needs (10%), and the condition and cleanliness of properties (6%).



Affordability and pricing

When describing their difficulties searching for properties, 54% of students cited the lack of available options that are affordable within their budget. Because of the speed with which students searched for and signed up to properties, they sometimes signed up for less reasonably priced properties in order to avoid feelings of precarity and missing out.



The price - couldn't find anything below 150 a week. I couldn't believe how expensive it was as both of my sisters were paying around 80-90 a week with bills included when they were at university. The price here is comparable to student accommodation in London. Where I live also brings difficulty when trying to get onto campus, particularly in winter- sometimes takes up to an hour to walk in December.

Undergraduate student living in Nevilles Cross, signed contract in October - December

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Finding a property which is reasonably priced (I later looked online at some properties in summer, many had not yet been rented and the price was much more affordable, but we were already stuck in a contract).

Undergraduate student living in Gilesgate, signed contract in October - December



Housing availability and competition

Housing availability and competition for housing in Durham was mentioned as a key cause of stress for students during their house search which led to feeling under pressure to sign a contract in order to secure a property because they may not have got one otherwise.

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The houses going insanely quickly where it does not give you time to think about your decision.

Undergraduate student living in Silver Street, signed contract in October - December



Difficulties with viewings and signings

The rush to view and sign for properties led to negative experiences for students when they arranged viewings. Students said they did not always have the time to see houses before they signed for them. Upon seeing the property, sometimes only once moving in, students said there were unexpected issues which they would have known about if they had the opportunity to view the property.

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Houses getting signed by others before we could view / viewings getting constantly cancelled. Told to just go and knock on random doors and hope the tenants would show us round as agents weren't doing viewings. Lack of affordable housing to suit all members of our group.

Undergraduate student living in Viaduct, signed contract in October - December

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When we viewed a property it had been sold by the time we got home so we just signed one without viewing it in person.

Undergraduate student living in Elvet, signed contract in October - December

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Since all private housing companies opened offers the same day they ran out of rooms, it was insecure to gamble on remaining options. For example, I attended Houghall at midnight when offers opened to catch first offers. 30+ other students present and failed to get the electronic contract signed before them so had to take a £180/week contract elsewhere (Prestige Student Living) [PBSA] instead of the limited £160/week contract (which has gone up to £200/week this year and sold out).

Undergraduate student living in Nevilles Cross signed contract in October - December

Recommendations

Develop a comprehensive housing communications campaign spanning the academic cycle

Students are searching and signing for property early in the academic year, for the next year, and feeling they were not able to make a good choice because of this. Some noted they would have had a more affordable property if they had waited. The Students' Union should expand on current communication campaigns, in conjunction with the University, to ensure students understand the private rental market, are aware of housing issues, and know where to access support, with specific messages around the best times of year to be looking for housing and signing a contract and the range of support on offer to students and how to access this.

Ensure information, guidance and support is designed to meet students where their mindset is

Students described feeling under immense pressure to sign a contract. Any campaigns, support, information and guidance must be designed with the understanding that students accessing these at the point of making housing choices are in a panicked state, fearful and under pressure - and likely to make decisions quickly.

Consider how peer voices can be used to support students making housing choices

Other students' experiences of finding accommodation was influential in how students thought about how to approaching finding and securing a property. As well as engaging across a number of local bodies, ensuring the voices of students can be heard through a communications campaign to provide peer-to-peer insight and assurance would be a powerful way of combatting pervasive myths around student housing.

Continue monitoring the student housing situation

Given the number of sources students felt pressure from, changing perceptions and behaviours of all actors involved is likely to be a long-term goal. The Students' Union should continue work to examine the housing situation in Durham through similar surveys in the future. Ensure that response rates are improved through reviewing the timing of the survey to reach students within term time but also at an appropriate point within their housing cycle. Refinement of the question set may also help improve retention through the survey by ensuring that questions are relevant, understandable and concise.

Conduct a comprehensive market impact assessment

While this survey provides evidence of where students feel that pressure to sign up for housing stems from, it does not deliver a comprehensive view of all the sources of pressure and exactly how they contribute to this. Develop an assessment that examines the University's role in influencing student housing and the broader ecosystem. This should investigate how key actors, including the University, local landlords, letting agents, and the local authority, contribute to the current housing culture in Durham.

Recommendations

Consider how housing can be scaled to match recruitment ambitions

Students care deeply about ensuring they can find housing that they can afford and is of good quality but said that the environment they are searching for such accommodation is competitive. If student numbers are projected to rise, the University should consider how its student recruitment relates to Durham's housing capacity and work in partnership with local bodies to ensure that any increase in student numbers is matched by affordable bed spaces, improved housing quality and stable or reduced market prices.

Consider how local bodies can work together to create culture change around housing choices

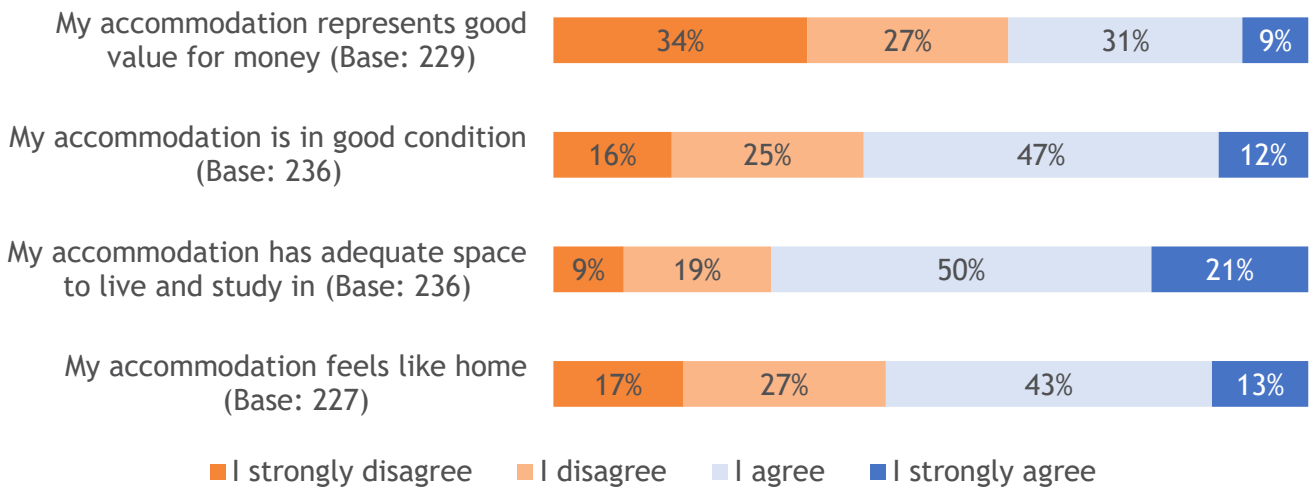
The sources of pressure that students feel came from a wide variety of actors. A co-ordinated effort between Durham SU, Durham University, the local authority and lettings agents is likely to be the most effective at bringing about true cultural change surrounding housing choices.

Experiences while living in accommodation

While the majority of participants said that their accommodation had adequate space and was in good condition, the majority did not think it was good value for money.

Respondents demonstrated reasonable agreement across three of the four statements regarding their perceptions of their accommodation: 71% agreed that their house had adequate space to live and study in, 59% agreed that their property was in good condition and 56% agreed that their house felt like home. However, this trend reverses when asked about value for money: 61% of respondents disagreed that their accommodation represented good value for money.

Levels of agreement with statements around accommodation value and condition. Base: All respondents, excluding those who selected 'I don't know' (Varies)



There are some clear divisions about whether accommodation is considered value for money; even at an overall level 40% of participants did believe that their accommodation was good value, suggesting highly varied experiences across Durham. Further, undergraduate students were more likely to disagree that their accommodation was good value for money. 65% of undergraduates disagreed that this is the case compared to 45% of postgraduates.

Over four in ten respondents said their accommodation was not in good condition and nearly seven in ten reported at least one issue with their accommodation.

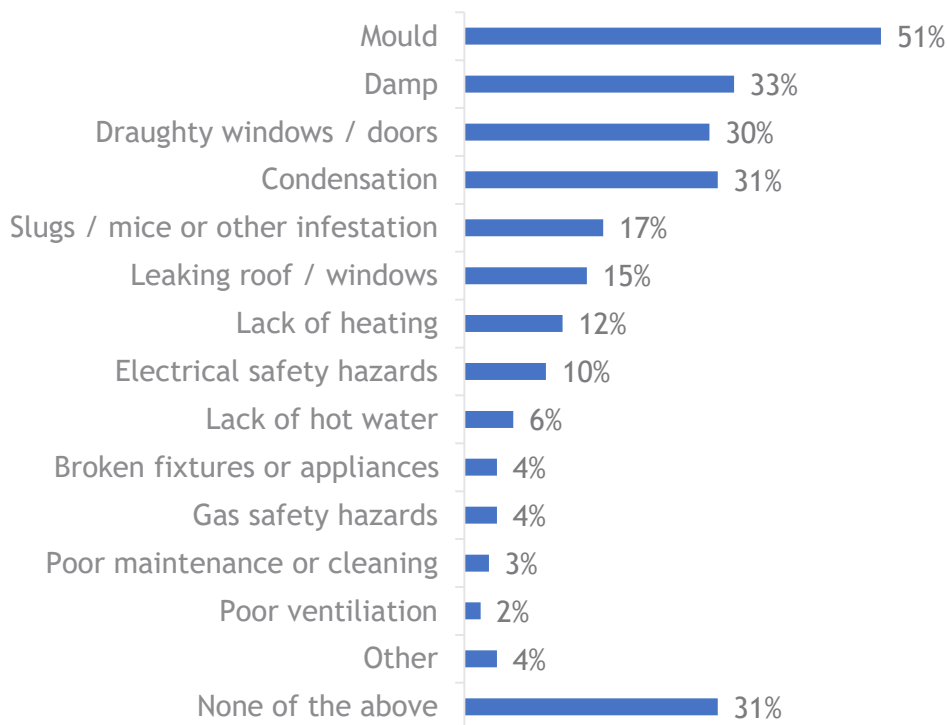
41% of participants disagreed that their accommodation was in good condition and it is clear that there are substantial proportions of accommodation that students live in that experience some sort of issue: 69% of respondents reported at least one issue with their accommodation. Among those that reported at least one issue, the average number of issues reported was 3.34 out of the 14 measured.

Mould, and conditions which would lead to mould, were the most commonly reported issues across participants, and undergraduates were more likely to experience these.

Mould was the most common issue reported regarding students' accommodation; over half of respondents (51%) indicated that this was present in their accommodation. This was followed by damp (33%), the presence of condensation (31%) and draughty windows and/or doors (30%). This is similar to [Students Organising for Sustainability's](#) research into private renting, which found 54% of students nationally experienced damp or mould in their accommodation and [Shelter's](#) research into students in the private rental sector in Wales, which also found that slightly over half of students reported mould.

Other issues, while reported by fewer students, were also reported including infestations (17%), leaks (15%) a lack of heating (12%) and electrical safety hazards (10%).

Proportion of participants reporting the presence of issues in their housing. Base: All respondents (240)



At an overall level, undergraduates were more likely to disagree that their accommodation was in good condition (46%, compared to 26% of postgraduates) and several issues appear to be more frequent among the undergraduate student population compared to postgraduates. Mould was reported to be an issue by 56% of undergraduate students, compared to 36% of postgraduates, while a leaking roof or windows affected 18% of undergraduate students and only 5% of postgraduate students. Further, a lack of heating was significantly more likely to be reported by students with a disability, with 20% of students with a disability reporting a lack of heating in their housing compared to 10% of those without a disability.

Students were invited to send any pictures alongside their responses of their accommodation, and

pictures of mould or damp were among the most common:



It should be noted that such conditions are potentially exacerbated by challenges students face relating to the cost of living and how this impacts upon decisions to heat their homes. When asked what actions they had taken to stay warm in their home instead of putting the heating on, despite feeling cold, 22% reported that they had taken none of the actions listed, meaning that 78% had avoided turning their heating on at some point. [Durham SU's](#) recent all-student survey found that

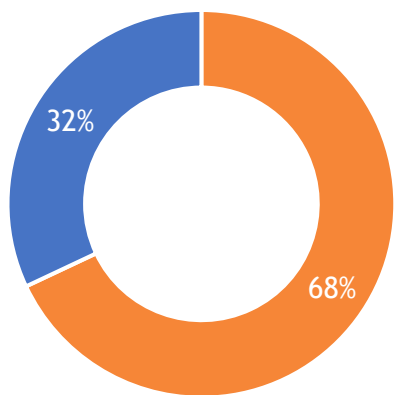
57% of students feel that their accommodation is unaffordable, and it is likely that this is linked to such decisions to avoid using heating. There was also a substantial difference in responses based on whether gas was included in students' rent, used as a proxy indicator that heating would be included. 69% of students who had gas included in their rent avoided turning their heating on rising to 86% who did not have this included. However, this still means a large proportion of students even with gas included are avoiding heating and some students reported that the allowance included for bills was insufficient: *"their "bills included" is a joke as their cap is ridiculously small- cannot put heating on."* (undergraduate living in Gilesgate).

The most frequent complaints that students reported making to their landlord were about mould and appliance faults, and there was widespread dissatisfaction with how complaints were handled.

Over two-thirds of respondents (68%) reported that they had made a complaint about their property to their landlord, property agent or provider. Among those that had reported an issue, over half (58%) reported that the issue was not resolved in a timely manner, while 60% reported that the issue was not resolved to their satisfaction. This group largely overlapped, meaning that 50% of those that had reported an issue had not had it resolved in either a timely manner or to their satisfaction.

Reports of complaints and perceptions of how it was handled

Base: All respondents (240)



- Has made a complaint
- Has not made a complaint

Base: All respondents who had made a complaint (161)



Was the issue resolved in a timely manner?



Was the issue resolved to your satisfaction?

- Yes
- No

A consistent theme when students described their experiences of raising a complaint with their landlord was the need to repeat serious issues on multiple occasions:

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Over 40 complaints ranging from appliances not working, excessive mould, broken hob, consistently broken boiler etc.

Undergraduate student living in Claypath

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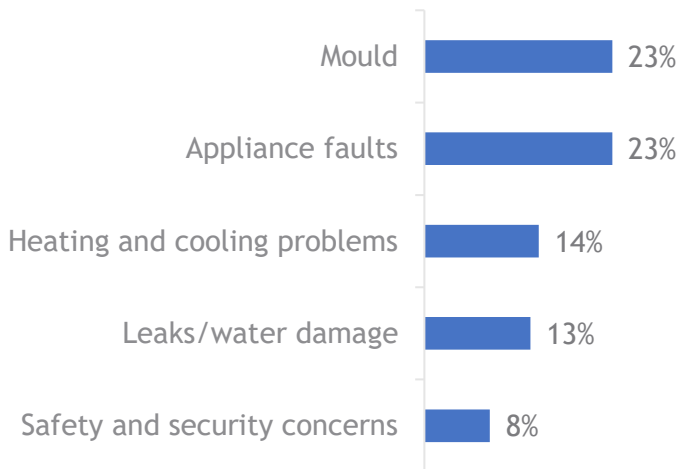
We sent an email at the beginning of our tenancy about the condition of the house when we collected our keys. There was rubbish everywhere, mould, rising damp, misplaced window seals, windows which do not shut properly, and window frames which move significantly in and out when minor pressure is applied. In this email we asked [landlord] to resolve this before we needed to briefly stay for resits. All [that] was completed (without notice of when) was only some of the rubbish being removed, during this process they broke a folding table in half.

Undergraduate student living in Gilesgate

Among those who had reported issues, mould was the most frequent complaint (23%), equal to appliance faults (23%).

Proportion of participants reporting having complained about issues with their housing

Base: All respondents who provided a response (158)



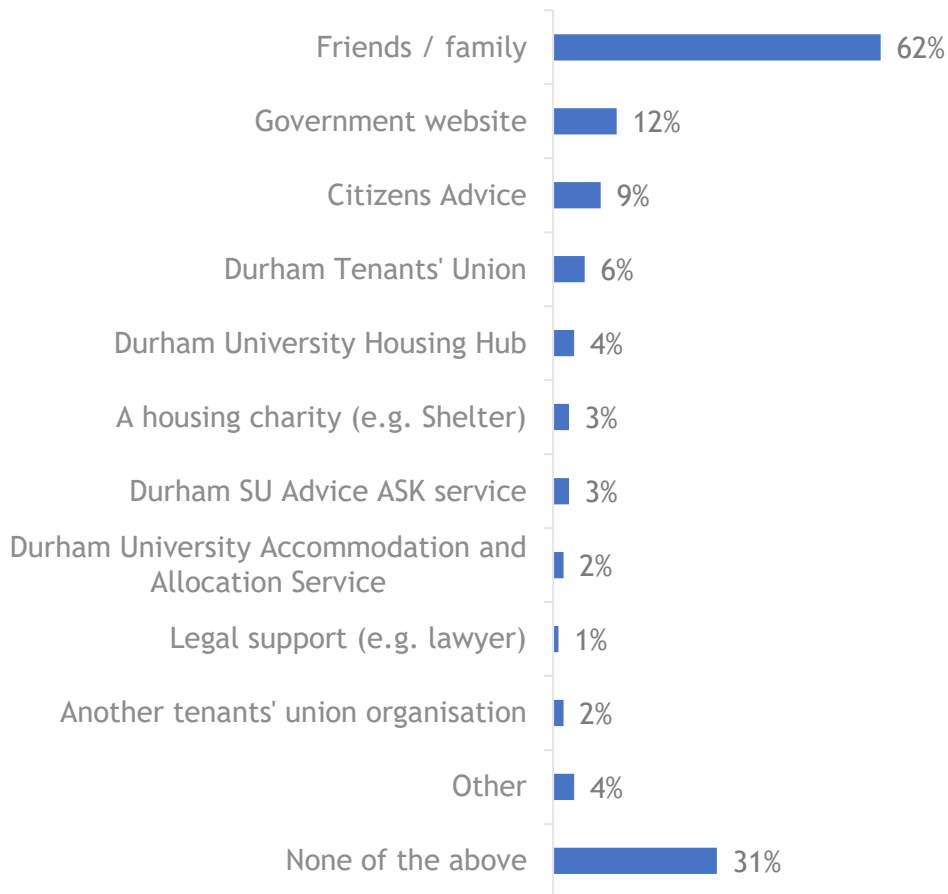
There were high levels of uncertainty surrounding where to go for support with housing needs.

There were fairly high levels of uncertainty around where to access support for any difficulties that students faced around renting. When asked if they would know where to access support if they encountered any such difficulties, 61% responded that they would not know and only 39% said they felt they would know where to go for support.

Family and friends are the most common source of housing support, with very few students saying they had used official sources of advice and guidance.

When asked if they had used certain services for housing in Durham, friends and family were the most commonly selected resource and nearly two-thirds (62%) reported they had turned to these connections. Despite half of students being dissatisfied with the timeliness and suitability of action taken to resolve a complaint, only 28% of students had sought formal support beyond family and friends. Use of Durham-specific services was low, with few saying they had used the Tenants' Union (6%), the University Housing Hub (4%), Durham SU Advice ASK service (3%) or the University Accommodation and Allocation service (2%).

Reported levels of use of different types of support available for housing issues/concerns. Base: All respondents (240)



Unsurprisingly, use of services was higher among those who had raised a complaint about their property with their landlord or property agent. Among this group, 75% had used at least one service or resource for support and 70% had turned to friends or family.

There was a perceived lack of support available from the University for students, however, their responses did not pinpoint exactly what students thought the institution should be doing.

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The University's does not provide enough support to students regarding poor housing conditions, especially mould and damp and coldness which can seriously adversely effect physical and mental health.

Undergraduate student living in Nevilles Cross

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University is very poor at communicating with students. No banner so unable to access any information, very poor support.

Undergraduate student living in Viaduct

Recommendations

Develop a comprehensive housing communications campaign spanning the academic cycle

61% of students would not know where to go for help with issues they had with renting and there is widespread dissatisfaction with how complaints are being dealt with. The Students' Union should expand on current communication campaigns, in conjunction with the University, to ensure students understand the private rental market, are aware of housing issues, and know where to access support, with specific messages around what support is on offer specifically for dealing with complaints and how it can help.

Campaign for changes to student finance

Students reported feeling like their accommodation was unaffordable and were taking action such as avoiding turning the heating on. To ensure students can meet rising costs, the Students' Union should campaign for changes to student finance which ensure that maintenance loans keep up with inflation.

Provide cost-of-living support to students

While student finance does not keep up with inflation and costs remain high, cost-of-living support, aimed at supporting those who are unable to afford their heating, may be beneficial to prevent the negative impacts of living and studying in cold homes.

Examine practices regarding energy caps to ensure these are set at appropriate levels

Some students reported that, where bills were included, these were insufficient to meet their basic heating needs. This was not an explicit aim of this research and therefore it could not establish if this was a small number of isolated cases or representative of practice across the sector. Further investigation of energy limits imposed by landlords should be conducted to determine whether practices of setting these lower than is needed to keep a warm home are widespread.

Relaunching a student housing accreditation scheme

There are widespread issues reported with private accommodation, including mould, damp, draughts and condensation. Evaluate the previous Landlord Assurance scheme and establish an updated and comprehensive accreditation framework for student accommodation that sets clear quality standards beyond current licensing requirements. This scheme should include mandatory annual property inspections and create a transparent mechanism for evaluating and maintaining housing quality, providing students with a reliable benchmark for selecting accommodation.

Consider licensing to drive up quality standards

Alongside an accreditation scheme, the scale of reported issues within student housing may fall within the scope of additional licensing for landlords operating in the student market to drive up quality standards.

Impact of housing on students

Students described being unable to focus on their studies due to stress related to their housing conditions.

Students described conditions where their housing was too cold to study in, they were distracted due to noise from housemates, and they worried frequently about dealing with poor housing conditions. This was mentally taxing and detracted from their ability to focus on university work.

“

In the winter we returned to our house to find that the dodgy boiler (reported and ignored over five times) had packed up and the house was freezing cold. It was a weekend so the letting agency refused to do anything and we were without heating from Saturday to Tuesday afternoon, making it impossible to focus on work. The amount of time we have spent dealing with the letting agent could have been better spent focusing on university work.

Undergraduate student living in Claypath

“

Tiredness upon working on assignments and attending seminars due to inability to sleep from cold & mould. There was also an issue with smell from the bathroom due to flooding of pipes (sewage) which made me unable to sleep. Leaking from the tap did the same. All of this negatively impacted my sleep, impacting on my ability to concentrate on uni work.

Undergraduate student living in Crossgate

Some students also said that they had taken time off university due to the negative impact this had on their wellbeing.

Participants described how the quality of their home environment had a negative impact on their physical health, mental health and wellbeing. Some students said this caused them to take time out from university or impacted their ability to complete university work.

“

Mainly due to my housing last year I have now had to take a year out from my studies. I don't have anywhere to leave currently and I can't go home as I am not in good terms with family.

Undergraduate student living in Gilesgate

“

Having to deal with mould has meant wasted time rather than doing my studies. Having clothes that are damp and smell bad mean that I am embarrassed to attend lectures. The mould in my house made me unwell during the winter so I missed lectures.

Undergraduate student living in Viaduct

The home environment was sometimes considered inappropriate to study in, and participants reported avoiding spending time in their homes.

Some participants said that they avoided working at home because it was not an environment

conducive to studying.

“

The lack of being able to work in my own home has made commuting daily become a necessity not something to choose. the house had made me extremely sick which also impacted my efforts to work.

Undergraduate student living in Gilesgate

This was also something reported among those who were avoiding turning their heating on, with nearly half of students reported that they had avoided their home in order to stay warm (48%), either by staying at university, through socialising, or staying elsewhere.

Ways participants reported trying to stay warm instead of turning the heating on. Base: All respondents (240)



23% have chosen to go out to socialise



42% have stayed longer in university



13% have stayed elsewhere

The impact of these housing quality issues on disabled students is additionally evident when they are described the negative impact that the condition of their housing has had on them:

“

Very stressed from emailing back and forth with my landlord about mould and them doing nothing to sort it out. Unable to work in my house due to the cold and not having a desk but as I have SPLDs I find it very difficult to work in communal libraries especially during the normal working day; disability rooms are always booked out weeks in advance so this affected my ability to complete assignments on time and to the best of my ability. The temperature of our flat and whether or not to put on the heating due to cost caused tension between my housemate and I which affected my concentration on my studies and overall wellbeing.

Undergraduate student living in Claypath

Recommendations

Ensure appropriate space is available on campus for students to spend time

While students avoid their accommodation due to being unable to heat it, appropriate space on campus for students who are trying to find a warm place to study or relax should be provided and maintained to give students respite from the conditions in poor quality accommodation. Library spaces, which are well staffed and resourced, are ideal for this, particularly if they have 24/7 opening hours.

Administration and finances

Use of guarantors was common, particularly for undergraduate students, but this requirement was challenging for international students to meet.

Over three quarters of students (78%) were asked to provide a UK-based homeowner as a guarantor to secure their accommodation while 20% were not. Undergraduate students were more likely to report that they were asked to provide this; 84% of undergraduate students were asked this compared to 60% of postgraduate students.

Of those asked, 94% were able to meet this requirement, while 6% were not. Of those who were unable to meet this requirement, 91% were international students. When asked for further feedback, one international student highlighted the impact that this demand had on them:

“

Finding a guarantor as an international student is a nightmare to proportions I cannot describe. There is nothing more humiliating than approaching practical strangers you've only known for 3 weeks and are going to sign a house with and begging them to legally bind themselves to your rent payments.

Undergraduate student living in Nevilles Cross

While nearly one in ten reported unexpected fees at the point of securing their property, answers indicate that this was mainly made up of requirements to pay tenancy deposits and contributions to the first month of rent.

Just under 1 in 10 participants (9%) said they had faced unexpected or additional fees in order to secure their property, while 85% had not and 5% were not sure. International students were more likely to feel unsure about whether they had paid additional or unexpected fees with 13% of this group reporting this compared to 4% of home students.

When asked what the unexpected costs were, the most predominant answer was that respondents were surprised by the size of the deposit that they were required to pay or were surprised that they needed to pay towards the first month's rent as well as the deposit. Those that specified the size of the deposit usually said it was around one month's rent. This indicates a lack of awareness of the expected costs when securing a rental property.

Some also referenced being asked to supply a holding deposit alongside a damages deposit. Four students referenced a booking or reservation fee and one said that their landlord had asked them for the TV license up front. One international student said that they were charged extra for using an international card to pay the deposit and another said:

“

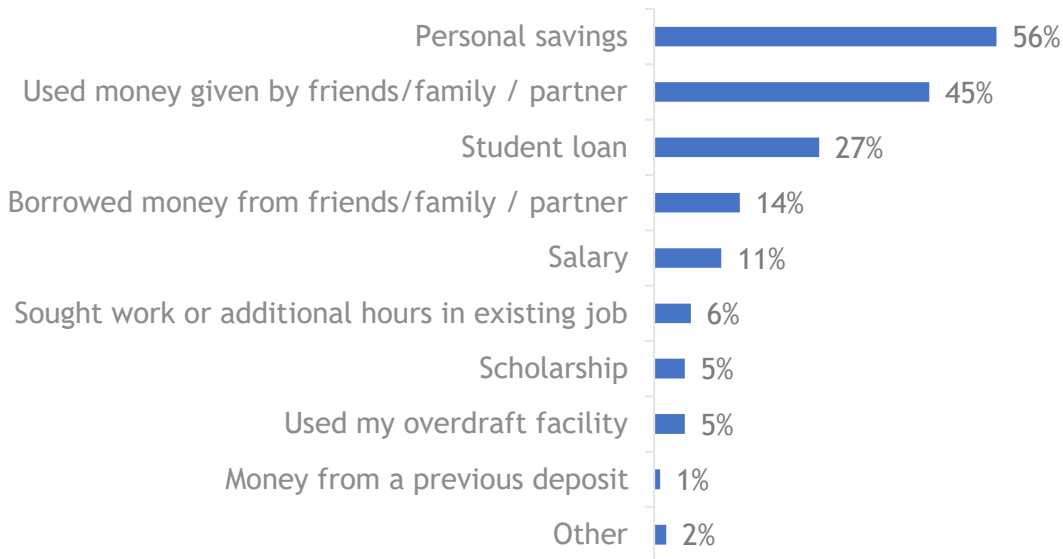
I didn't know we had to tip landlords and still don't understand why.

Postgraduate taught student living in Gilesgate

Personal savings were used to fund deposit payments by over half of students surveyed.

The majority of students used their personal savings to fund their deposit (56%). This was followed by those using money given to them by a personal contact such as friends, family or a partner (45%) and those who used their student loan (27%).

Sources of funding to pay for a deposit. Base: All respondents, excluding those who indicated they did not pay a deposit (238)



Most respondents reported that their deposit was contained in a deposit protection scheme, but there was widespread lack of awareness of whether this was the case and where it was held.

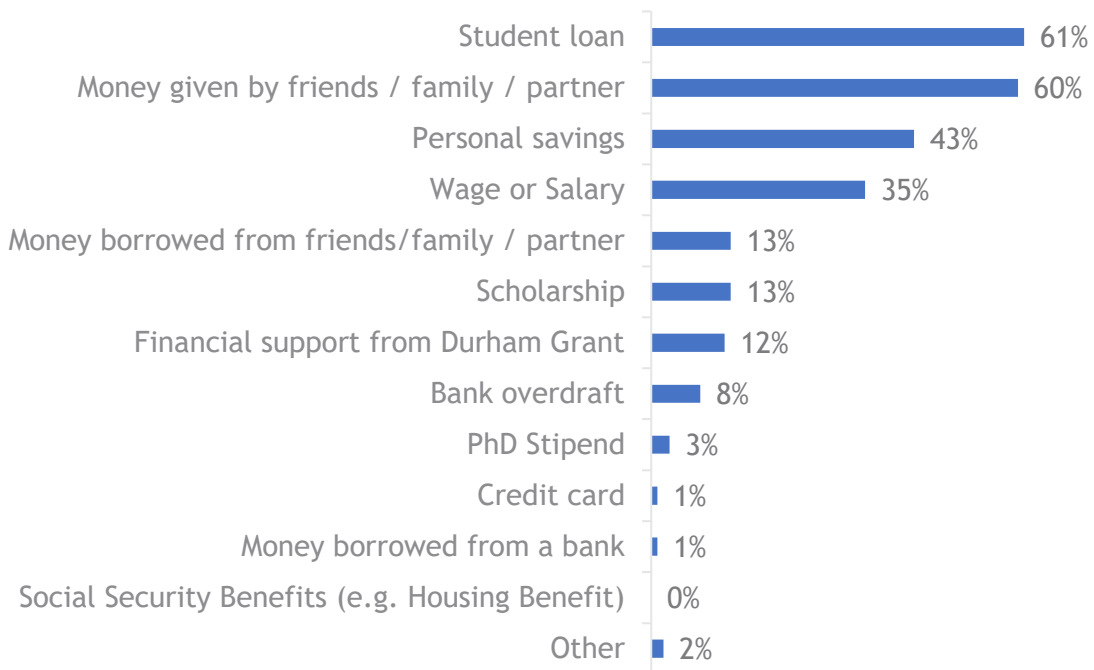
Most participants (63%) reported that their deposit was held in a deposit protection scheme, but a substantial minority were unsure whether it was or not (34%). A small proportion (3%) indicated that their deposit was not held in a deposit protection scheme.

Among those who reported that their deposit was held in a deposit protection scheme, the largest proportion were unsure about what sort of scheme it was held in (44%). Just over a third (34%) reported that it was held in a Deposit Protection Service scheme (34%), followed by MyDeposits (12%) and the Tenancy Deposit Scheme (7%).

Student loans and money given by friends, family and partners were used by the majority of respondents to finance their rent and bills.

The majority used their student loan to pay their rent and bills (61%), as well as money given by a personal contact such as friends or family (60%). Just over 1 in 10 had used financial support from the Durham Grant (12%) to cover these living costs.

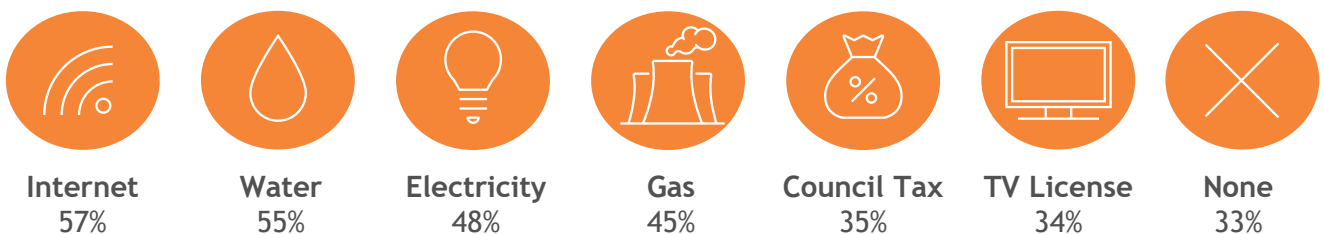
Sources of funding to pay for rental costs and bills. Base: All respondents (240)



Some of the sources of income indicate that students experience challenges paying their rent. 8% of students said they had used an overdraft to pay their rent. Albeit small in number, 1% said they had used a credit card and the same proportion said they had borrowed money from the bank. Just under 1 in 10 students (9%) reported that they had missed a rent payment or been unable to pay rent when renting in Durham as a student.

When asked what bills were included within their rent, over half of students reported that their internet (57%) and water are included (55%). A third of respondents reported that they don't have any bills included within their rent, meaning they manage and pay these separately.

Utilities included in respondents' rent prices. Base: All respondents (240)



Postgraduate students reported administrative challenges associated with paying council tax.

The vast majority (93%) of respondents reported that they didn't pay council tax, but 7% of respondents reported that they did. Postgraduate students were more likely to pay council tax than undergraduate students. 17% and 4% from each group respectively reported that they do.

A small number (10) of students outlined issues they had had with paying their council tax, including apparent administrative errors and council tax deadlines not aligning with their time at university. Of these 10 students, 8 were postgraduates.

“

Originally the council tax bill was through me as I handle the bills for our property but once contacting them to tell them I was a student my access was revoked. Also we were sent a court summons after "not paying" when they had not sent any previous letters or emails, after I had been told by a worker over the phone that they had set up a direct debit for me, but in fact they failed to do the last step so we hadn't paid in months.

Postgraduate research student living in Gilesgate

“

Yes - it's been a nightmare trying to get it sorted. to begin with, it went through the landlord and he messed it up, leading to us having to appeal a court summons. then we handled it directly, but the council kept not telling us how much we owed (we had a crossover where 1/4 was transitioning to a PhD, 1 was on medical leave, and I am part-time) and their delay lead to us being summonsed again. we appealed both times and in the end it was resolved only after months of uncertainty

Postgraduate taught student living in Gilesgate

Almost one in five respondents noted unfair deposits for cleaning, rubbish removals, replacement of appliances and garden work.

19% of respondents said that they faced unfair deductions from their rental deposit and 54% said that they had not. Due to the timing of the surveys, there was a high level of uncertainty (27%) about whether this was the case as respondents had not received their deposits back yet. However, almost one in five represents a substantial minority of respondents reporting unfair deductions. International students (69%) were less likely to report unfair deductions than home students (50%).

Cleaning fees, rubbish removals, replacements of broken appliances and garden work were all cited as reasons why deductions had been made to respondents' deposits. It was common for respondents to reference issues which they had noted at the point of moving in and leaving their property in a similar condition. For those who had evidence, such as being charged for a room being painted a different colour when they had not, they said it took multiple attempts to have deductions reinstated.

“

Said we painted a wall when we didn't, their photos of our house before we moved out proved that we didn't. Wanted to charge us £100. We ended up getting it back after a battle back and forth.

Undergraduate student living in Viaduct

Respondents also referenced being charged for broken items which had either been broken at the point of moving in or had broken during their tenancy, had been reported as in need of repair but the issue had not been addressed.

Recommendations

Develop a comprehensive housing communications campaign spanning the academic cycle

Students who perceived unfair costs when signing up to a house typically referred to expected costs, suggesting that they are not aware of what costs to expect. International students reported difficulties with getting UK based guarantors, and postgraduate students noted administrative challenges with council tax. As noted in the previous section, students are also unaware of where to go for help, meaning that when they encounter such issues, they do not have an understanding of what support is on offer.

The Students' Union should expand on current communication campaigns, in conjunction with the University, to ensure students understand the private rental market, are aware of housing issues, and know where to access support, with specific messages around how deposits are calculated, specific information about deposits and guarantors, including tailored information for international students and specific support available to students regarding council tax, aimed predominantly at postgraduates.

Reinstate international student guarantor programme

International students reported difficulties with finding a UK-based guarantor, particularly when they had only been in the UK for a short period of time. Reintroduce a university-backed guarantor scheme specifically designed to support international students. This program should provide a cost-free, transparent alternative to private guarantor services, removing financial barriers and administrative complexities for international students seeking accommodation.

Reflections

The housing market in Durham is creating a clear source of pressure for students considering where they will live and, combined with students' need to prioritise affordability, this sustains conditions whereby students are unable to make informed choices about where they should live. The need for change surrounding the student housing market is apparent, and it must empower students to make positive decisions based on a clear understanding of their options.

There is evidence of good practice among actors in Durham's housing market as many students are satisfied with their living conditions. There are however large proportions of students who report some issue with their housing, many more than would indicate that issues are a few isolated occurrences of poor quality. External pressures regarding the cost-of-living may be impacting this and action is needed across a multitude of organisations to ensure that students are supported, understand where they can access support, and that landlords and agents are held to account when delivering a poor-quality service.

Within these key areas, the differential experiences of accommodation across groups should be recognised. Postgraduates and international students all experience different administrative processes and being outside of the "norm" may be impacting the support they receive. Students with disabilities also report higher levels of impact on their health when things go wrong.

The low levels of awareness of where to seek help with renting, which includes the processes for finding and securing a property and with complaints and disputes with landlords during and after their tenancy, were concerning. When combined with low levels of support seeking outside of peers and family, this creates a challenging set of circumstances whereby students may not be getting the support they need to resolve issues smoothly. It is pertinent that general awareness is raised and this can only be achieved through all actors locally working together to maintain and sustain a housing market which works for all involved.



Sample demographics



Survey sample demographics

Academic Disciplines

	%	Count
Accounting	1%	2
Anthropology	5%	12
Archaeology	4%	10
Biosciences	8%	20
Chemistry	3%	6
Classics and Ancient History	6%	14
Computer Science	6%	14
Earth Sciences	2%	4
Economics	3%	6
Education	3%	6
Engineering	5%	13
English Studies	8%	19
Finance	1%	2
Geography	5%	13
Government and International Affairs	1%	2
History	8%	18
Law	5%	13
Management and Marketing	3%	8
Mathematical Sciences	8%	18
Modern Languages and Cultures	5%	13
Music	2%	5
Philosophy	4%	10
Physics	11%	26
Psychology	6%	14
Sociology	5%	12
Sport and Exercise Science	0%	1
Theology & Religion	2%	5
TOTAL	100%	240

Home / International

	%	Count
I am a UK citizen studying in the UK.	81%	194
International	19%	46
TOTAL	100%	240

Study Level

	%	Count
Postgraduate Research	14%	34
Postgraduate Taught	10%	24
Undergraduate	76%	180
TOTAL	100%	240

Study Year

	%	Count
Year One	14%	33
Year Two	48%	115
Year Three	29%	70
Year Four	8%	19
Year Seven	0%	1
Year Eight and beyond	0%	1
TOTAL	100%	240

Gender

	%	Count
Woman (including transgender women)	60%	145
Man (including transgender man)	30%	73
Non-binary	3%	6
I prefer to self-describe	1%	2
Gender Fluid	1%	2
Transgender	0%	1
Agender	0%	1
Prefer not to say	4%	10
TOTAL	100%	240

Disability

	%	Count
No	66%	158
Yes	23%	56
I prefer not to say	6%	14
I don't know	5%	12
TOTAL	100%	240

Identification with assigned sex at birth

	%	Count
Yes	90%	216
No	4%	9
I prefer not to say	6%	15
TOTAL	100%	240

Sexual Orientation

	%	Count
Asexual	3%	6
Bisexual	15%	37
Gay/lesbian	8%	19
Heterosexual	52%	125
I prefer not to say	13%	31
I prefer to self-describe	1%	2
Pansexual	2%	5
Queer	6%	15
TOTAL	100%	240

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