

SSP 09

Ymgynghoriad ar flaenoriaethau'r Pwyllgor Llywodraeth Leol a Thai ar gyfer  
y Chweched Senedd

Consultation on the Local Government and Housing Committee's priorities  
for the Sixth Senedd

Ymateb gan: Undeb Cenedlaethol Myfyrwyr Cymru

Response from: National Union of Students Wales (NUS Wales)

# Consultation Response

## NUS Wales' response to the Senedd's Local Government and Housing Committee call for evidence on the committee's priorities for the sixth Senedd.

1. National Union of Students Wales (NUS Wales) is the representative body of more than 250,000 students in Wales. We work on behalf of 20 member students' unions on the issues that affect students in higher education and further education.
2. The NUS Wales priority campaign in 2021/22 will be to make improving student housing a priority of the Welsh Government. We want to empower students to take action on their housing and raise the profile of poor student housing as an issue that affects every aspect of a student's life. At present, housing legislation lets students down and does not make clear how students can access support, advocacy, redress and recourse with their housing.
3. We believe the Local Government and Housing Committee should conduct a one-day inquiry into student housing early in the sixth Senedd term, with a view to producing a wider report on the issue with recommendations to Welsh Government by the end of the term. As this is a clear area of policy overlap, we believe the Committee should work with the Children, Young People and Education Committee to share workload and ensure the committees are working in tandem on this issue.
4. We are working in partnership with Shelter Cymru to get a full picture of students' housing experiences and examine the rights to recourse that students have under the current legislative framework. Unless otherwise stated, statistics quoted in this response come from a joint NUS Wales-Shelter Cymru survey of students in Wales conducted in May-June 2021.
5. Shelter Cymru has stated that the regulatory and legislative framework for student housing in Wales is opaque and complex. With a patchwork of voluntary codes, guidelines and laws attempting to cover a changing and fast-growing sector, it is no surprise that so many students feel powerless to address issues with their accommodation.
6. Shelter Cymru also believes that navigating the regulations to achieve recourse/redress is difficult for individuals with a good understanding of housing law and near impossible for many young people, living away from home for the first time. This creates a power imbalance and has contributed to a culture of complacency within student housing, which sees people living in poor conditions with very few options to remedy this injustice.
7. The perception that students should "put up with" inferior housing standards and are resilient enough to deal with issues in their housing is problematic and feeds into that culture of complacency. A joint NUS Wales-Shelter Cymru survey has revealed the extent of the issues facing students in their housing. More than half of respondents to the survey said they had encountered damp or mould in their student housing. 46 per cent reported disrepair in their accommodation, almost a third said affordability was a problem, and 31 per cent had experienced an issue with their landlord.

8. A student's housing has a direct impact on their wellbeing. 65 per cent of students said issues with their accommodation impacted their mental health, while 35 per cent said the same for their physical health. 26 per cent said their housing had affected their academic achievements, and 24 per cent reported it had impacted their relationships with friends and/or family.
9. Just four in ten students think their accommodation represents 'good' or 'very good' value for money, while a quarter say theirs represents 'poor' or 'very poor' value for money. More than three quarters of students pay £120 or less a week for their accommodation. 15 per cent pay between £121 and £150 a week and fewer than ten per cent pay more than £151.
10. There is a significant lack of Welsh-specific information on the student housing sector, and it is clear that students do not know where to seek support for housing issues. More than half said they would go to their friends and/or family for accommodation support, while 31 per cent would go to their students' union and 30 per cent to their education provider. 23 per cent said they would use online forums and/or social media, 22 per cent would contact Citizens Advice, and eight per cent would contact Shelter Cymru.
11. Most students tend to live in the private rented sector - 45 per cent of students report living in privately rented houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) where a group of students rent rooms in a house/flat owned by a private landlord. 19 per cent live in private rented sector alone or with a partner, 15 per cent live in accommodation owned by their education provider, and five per cent live in purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA). A further seven per cent of students live in a home mortgaged in their name or owned outright.
12. The growth of the PBSA market in recent years has not had a significant impact on standards for students across the board and has not motivated other areas of the student housing market to improve. Despite the growth of the PBSA market driving an increase in average student rent prices, standards in PBSA do not match standards in the rest of the housing sector, despite higher prices. PBSA are at the higher end of the student accommodation price scale and are often marketed towards international students and more affluent home students.
13. Students are often pressured by commercial landlords or letting agents to sign housing contracts early in the academic year when there is no need to rush into a decision about where the student wants to live or who they want to live with. More than 40 per cent of students say they have felt pressured to sign an accommodation contract.
14. The pandemic has exposed serious shortcomings in the student housing sector. The fixed-term nature of contracts – student contracts tend to be nine or 12 months in length – meant that students had no ability to leave their contracts early during lockdowns. While students living in accommodation provided by their education provider were allowed to leave their contracts early at no cost, and could access rent rebates for times they could not access their accommodation due to lockdown, the same could not be said for those in the private rented sector (PRS). Students living in the PRS had to rely on the goodwill of their landlords. Responding to an NUS survey at the beginning of the pandemic, just nine per cent of students said they had been allowed to leave their accommodation contract early.
15. Students who planned to travel away from their term-time accommodation for the 2020/21 Christmas break were encouraged to do so by Welsh Government by 9 December 2020. Students were only permitted to return to campus and term-time accommodation from 12 April 2021. The average annual rent in Wales is £4,768 per annum, meaning students who could not access their accommodation in the four months between 9 December and 12 April paid an average of £1,589 for rooms they were unable to use.