

The National Union of Students Wales (NUS Wales) response to the Senedd's Local Government and Housing Committee inquiry into the private rented sector

About NUS Wales:

National Union of Students Wales (NUS Wales) is the representative body of more than 250,000 students, learners and apprentices in Wales. We work on behalf of 20 member students' unions and colleges on the issues that affect students in higher education and further education.

The supply, quality and affordability of accommodation in the private rented sector

1. A culture of complacency and perceived 'rite of passage' of students to live in poor quality housing, means that poor conditions in students' homes are entrenched within our society and have been for decades. It is NUS Wales' view that only fundamental reform, led in partnership with students and other key stakeholders, will deliver the desired change.
2. In addition to responding to the inquiry questions, NUS Wales has included testimonials from students throughout the response to best reflect their experience of the private rental housing sector in Wales.
3. Research from SOS-UK¹ (Students Organising for Sustainability UK), published in April 2023, revealed that 70% of university students in Wales had damp or mould in their current accommodation. Furthermore, the study found that 65% of students felt "uncomfortably cold" at home and almost half said this had a negative effect on their studies.
4. This has a detrimental impact on the health and wellbeing of student tenants. NUS Wales' Broken Foundations Report² -

¹ SOS-UK is a student-led education charity focusing on sustainability. Homes Fit for Study 2023 research here: <https://www.sos-uk.org/research/homes-fit-for-study>

² https://sheltercymru.org.uk/policy_and_research/broken-foundations-fix-student-housing/

completed alongside Shelter Cymru in 2022 - found that 65% of students said issues with their accommodation had a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing. The report also highlighted that for more than a third (35%) of students accommodation had a negative impact on their physical health.

"My room is so cold and humid that mould started spreading from the walls to my clothes. There's drafts even with the windows closed and it's so cold that the heating barely helps" - Cardiff student, private rented accommodation

"Our heating broke and we went days without heating and hot water in the middle of winter. They finally put new windows into our flat after complaining in September that the window was broken and meant we both got sick because of mould and our stuff was also covered with mould." - Bangor student, private rented accommodation

5. Students are among the worst affected by poorly insulated accommodation, as some multi-occupancy properties (HMOs) are exempt from the EPC requirements under the law.³
6. Moreover, student accommodation prices have increased by 61% in the last decade which means they are paying more for housing which is falling in standard.⁴ SOS-UK research found that almost three quarters of students are spending less money on food to meet rental costs and around half are borrowing money from friends and family to pay bills.⁵ Rent is being pushed up because of issues in the wider market. Students are struggling to find accommodation - with many 'sofa-surfing', or commuting long distances to attend campus - and are being forced into paying large sums of money upfront as they compete with their peers to secure properties.
7. A shrinking rental market and growing demand is seeing increased competition amongst would-be tenants. This pushes prices up, creates an imbalance of power between landlord and tenant, and forces young people into substandard living conditions to avoid homelessness.

"We have students commuting from Manchester, Liverpool, most of Northern England actually due to a lack of suitable

³ <https://www.sos-uk.org/research/homes-fit-for-study>

⁴ <https://www.unipol.org.uk/news/accommodation-costs-survey-2021-launched>

⁵ <https://www.sos-uk.org/research/homes-fit-for-study>

accommodation for students in the city” - Undeb Bangor Sabbatical Officer, Bangor University.

8. Students’ Unions have also reported international students arriving to the Students’ Union, new to the country, asking for accommodation because they were unable to find some on their own. In Cardiff in September 2021, international students were forced to return to their home countries and take interruptions of study (defer their places) due to lack of suitable accommodation; this situation did not improve this academic year.

Barriers to accessing the private rented sector including challenges facing young people and people with pets

9. The practice of requiring a UK Homeowner Guarantor remains a significant barrier to students accessing private rented accommodation. International students, postgraduate research students (e.g., those studying for a PhD), estranged students and care leavers have all reported challenges in securing affordable property near their institution. While universities often offer guarantor services, whereby they can act as a guarantor for students, these services are limited.
10. International students are less likely to have links to UK homeowners and have reported being asked for 6 months of rent upfront in lieu of a guarantor. This significantly limits their choice of accommodation and leaves them vulnerable to exploitation. International students find their housing quality is low and landlords have little incentive to keep up to date with basic maintenance because rent was paid upfront.

“It is incredibly difficult to find a house without a homeowner guarantor, which is almost impossible to get as an estranged student from a low-income area.”

“My PhD stipend does not count as income to most agencies. As an international student, I’ve therefore had to take out loans to cover upfront rent costs because the agencies have refused to rent me a property without it”

How effectively the private rented sector is regulated

“My landlord suggested we went halves on the doorbell for my flat, for which I pay £650 a month. The doorbell fell off the wall and the landlord said he’d only replace it once,

and wouldn't again. Obviously, I didn't go halves on the doorbell, I put my foot down."

11. Students feel exploited by landlords, and claim they struggle to get basic repairs completed. NUS Wales spoke to one student whose bedroom was deemed 'unfit for human habitation' by Environmental Health because of mould. In response, the letting agency built a new wall in front of the existing, mouldy, exterior wall. While this improved the aesthetics of the room, it did not fix the underlying issue, and this student said they continued to become ill as a result of the conditions they were living in.
12. Students have told NUS Wales they feel powerless to take action against their landlords, and, due to a shortage of student housing, need to just 'put up with' the conditions:

"We moved in in July and they said that the previous tenants hadn't looked after it, but the landlord said that was our problem to sort out and clean up" - Cardiff student, paying £350 per person per month (pppm) (bills not included).

13. At the end of tenancies, students face additional obstacles in getting their deposits returned. Many claim landlords deduct significant amounts from their deposits to cover natural wear and tear, or to cover cleaning costs where the house has already been cleaned.

"I moved into my friend's old house this year - my mate had been charged £80 per person in a 3-bed house for a professional clean off their deposit. When we moved in the house was filthy - my mate's 'end of tenancy' photos showed they had left it clean. The landlord clearly had not had the house cleaned - in fact it looked like someone had come in to do the opposite." - Bangor student, £320 ppm (bills not included)

14. Students are often first-time renters, with limited experience of the private rented sector. It is felt, both by Students' Unions and students themselves, that landlords take advantage of this, assuming students do not know their rights.

"My landlord completely withheld my deposit for two months after we moved out. We spoke to our Students' Union who said we could raise disputes with the deposit

protection service. The second we told the agency this is what we were doing, our deposit was returned in full." -
3rd year student, Swansea University