



**YORK
STUDENT
THINK TANK**

THROUGH THE ROOF

YORK'S STUDENT HOUSING CRISIS

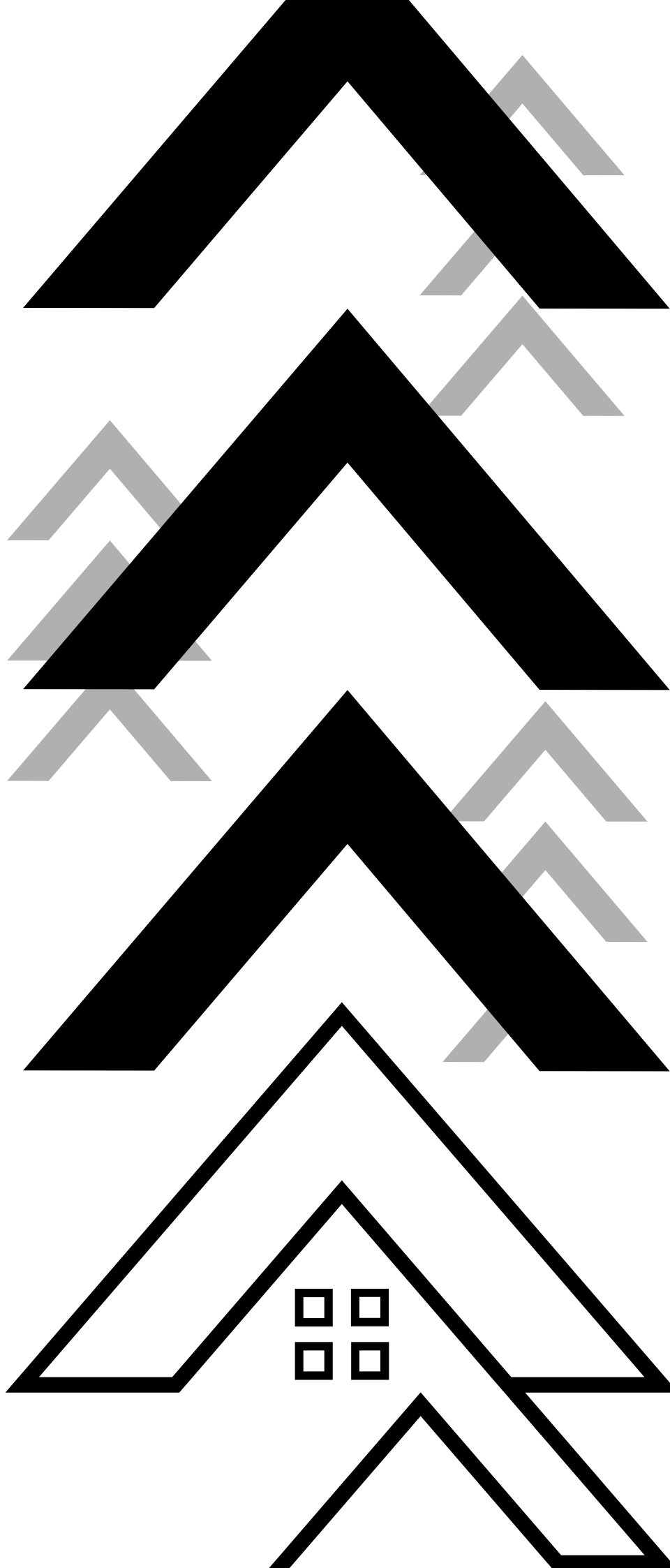


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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report examines the student housing market of York, in which rising prices have negatively affected the experience of the large student population. In the context of a national cost-of-living crisis, students renting in York face increasing instability and unaffordability.

This paper begins by introducing the national picture of rising rent for students. It situates York in a wider structurally unstable housing market with national policies such as the Renters' Rights Act providing limited response.

York student housing is then shown to be stuck between high demand and low supply, deploying evidence from surveys and Freedom of Information request data to display a hostile rental market with high pricing and low accountability.

Key issues are identified:

- Limited relationships between landlords, City of York Council, University of York and its' Students' Union (SU) are a key issue, shown through interviews with individual stakeholders.
- Local government planning and housing regulation is equally shown to be a key issue, particularly in regard to House in Multiple Occupation (HMO) licensing.
- The predominance of university commercial interests.

In order to test solutions, a case study of Durham and its University is conducted. With a similar supply/demand issue, its decision to establish extended relationships with landlords establishes a useful precedent for solutions in York.

Our solutions are then outlined. Evaluated against the criteria of pace, strategic impact and feasibility, they are as follows:

- Establish a wider governance board that engages all stakeholders in student housing.
- Establish a code of practice for landlords as implemented in Durham previously.
- Greater SU action in supporting students through lobbying and the formation of a webpage.
- Establish a university board to set on-campus accommodation prices.
- Establish rent controls that target University-Owned and Purpose-Built Student Accommodation specifically.

Our recommendations are then formed as follows:

Short-term recommendations

1. Establish a University board to set on-campus accommodation prices.
2. Greater from the SU action in setting up a website for real-time housing information and lobbying the university for greater transparency.

Long-term recommendations

1. Streamlining HMO licensing.
2. Establishing a wider governance board for student housing.

METHODOLOGY

This paper draws on a range of primary and secondary research as its evidence base.

Primary evidence included:

- Publicly available web-scraped data courtesy of Student House Finder.
- Interviews with local government officials and York Students' Union Sabbatical Officers,
- Survey data collected through the York Student Think Tank (YSTT) Housing Survey 2025.

Secondary evidence included:

- National surveys and reports on student accommodation, primarily Office for National Statistics (ONS) data.
- Freedom of Information requests to City of York Council.
- Academic literature relevant to the research focus.

- This report utilised Student House Finder data gathered on student rent prices in York from years from 2023-2026, with specific analysis of the data for tenancies in the 2025-2026 academic year being conducted by number of bedrooms.
- Monthly student rents were calculated with an estimate of 4.3475 weeks per month to ease comparison between regional rent prices, which are often presented as monthly.
- The monthly rent price for York students was subsequently compared to the rate for non-students, whilst also accounting for the price of bills, as it is often included in student rent prices.
- For student properties listed without bills included, the average bill price for the York region was added, £217 per month for electricity, gas and water (Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, 2026; Money Helper, 2025).
- Moreover, comparisons were made between the weekly rent rate for York students in both Houses of Multiple Occupation (HMOs) and university halls of residence in relation to the average price of rent in York.
- The analysis focused on HMOs and on campus accommodation as they are often the most common types of housing students tend to use throughout their studies, as well as both types having the most data available.

HOUSING IN THE NATIONAL PICTURE

Students are significantly affected by the ongoing cost of living crisis, with housing costs making up a significant proportion of student living cost. Although some factors of the wider crisis are beyond immediate control, this paper holds that the costs and experiences of housing, particularly within the student rental market, can be improved by taking effective action. The relationship between housing costs and the wider cost of living is also reflected in the wider rental market, where rents have rapidly increased following the Covid-19 pandemic. Between 2021 and 2024, the average cost of a new let rose by around 27%, which equates to an estimated increase of £270 per month for tenants, whilst also outgrowing wages, which rose by approximately 19% over the same period (Big Issue, 2024).

Office for National Statistics' data (ONS) reiterates that national rent inflation remains elevated, even though the pace of increases has begun to slow. Average UK private rents reached £1,368 per month by December 2025, representing annual growth of 4.0%. England saw average rents of £1,424, with regional variation reflecting differing supply pressures, including particularly high growth in northern regions (ONS, 2026). The moderation in rent growth is not necessarily a sign of improving affordability, but instead reflects tenants reaching the limits of what they can pay.

Nationally, students pay more than 30% in rent compared to non-students, with rising rents and supply shortages making accommodation one of the most pressing challenges facing students (Morris, 2025; NUS, 2024; Unipol, 2025).

This issue is particularly acute in York, where the recent rapid growth in student numbers has far outpaced the availability of affordable and sufficient housing. Although the shortage of high-quality, reasonably priced accommodation is often talked about anecdotally, substantial survey data demonstrates the severity of the situation and its impact on student wellbeing. However, this is not a one-causal issue. To understand the whole picture, this report will also consider the broader pressures on universities' fiscal positions w

Rising rents limit the quality of education as students whose rents exceed their maintenance loans are unable to afford rent and are more likely to defer, drop out, or commute long distances, with many forced to miss out on contact hours due to taking up paid work often in the hospitality or retail industries (Morris, 2025; Education Policy Institute, 2025). Furthermore, beyond physical housing quality, housing unaffordability has also shown impacts on students' mental health. National student surveys found that 45% of students reported their studies had suffered due to rental costs (Hock et al, 2024). These outcomes ultimately undermine the quality of higher education and disproportionately impact economically disadvantaged students, excluding them not only from the university experience as a whole.

THE RENTERS' RIGHTS ACT

The UK government's current approach to the rental market centres on regulatory reform aimed at improving tenant security and professionalising the private rented sector. The Renters' Rights Act 2025 represents the most substantial overhaul of rental law in England in decades, affecting approximately 11 million renters. The Act's core objective is to rebalance power between landlords and tenants whilst also improving housing standards and accountability (UK Government, 2025).

Abolition of “no-fault” evictions:

From May 2026, landlords must provide a legitimate statutory reason to regain possession, such as rent arrears or anti-social behaviour, rather than ending tenancies without explanation. All assured shorthold tenancies will convert into periodic tenancies with no fixed end date, giving tenants greater long-term security. This reform is intended to reduce housing instability and prevent retaliatory evictions when tenants raise complaints about property conditions.

Regulation of rent increases:

The Act also introduces tighter regulation of rent increases. Landlords may increase rent only once per year using a formal statutory process, and tenants gain stronger rights to challenge excessive increases through the First-tier Tribunal. These provisions aim to prevent rent hikes from being used as a de facto eviction mechanism and to improve affordability predictability for renters.

Anti-discrimination and enforcement protections:

Landlords and letting agents will be prohibited from refusing applicants solely because they receive benefits or have children, unless there is a clear and proportionate justification. This extends protections beyond existing equality legislation by directly regulating rental practices. Enforcement mechanisms are also significantly expanded as local authorities will have stronger powers to impose fines for breaches, and later implementation phases will introduce a national landlord database and ombudsman. Future measures include applying the Decent Homes Standard to private rentals and extending Awaab's Law to ensure hazards such as damp and mould are addressed promptly by landlords.

Limitations:

The Renters' Rights Act introduces significant improvements for renters nationally, but does not address core issues for students. The act prioritises long-term stability for renters and accountability for landlords, yet one-year tenancies typically held by students mean the Act's protections are unlikely to be enforced.

HOUSING IN YORK

York's rental market is characterised by high demand and limited supply, partly due to the city's attractiveness as both a tourist and academic destination, given that it is a Russell Group university. Due to this popularity, the cost of living in York is expensive, with York St John Students' Union's Housing Issues Report identifying affordability as the dominant concern among respondents (York St John Students' Union, 2023).

York particularly suffers from a disproportionate growth in student numbers in comparison to a limited supply of housing, as the University of York's student population has increased by around 25% in the last decade.

The construction of Anne Lister and David Kato College (2021–2022) inadvertently worsened York's student housing crisis. A working theory is that the University used the addition of these new beds to justify an increase in student admissions rather than to solve the 'acute demand for student-specific housing' (Wright, 2022).

As a result, the surge in student numbers outpaced the number of beds in the private rented sector, creating a rapid increase in demand and thus driving up housing prices across multiple types of student accommodation.

When compared to the national average, the situation in York is particularly concerning. In 2025 the city ranked as the third most expensive city in the UK for student housing (behind London and Bristol) with an average rate of £206ppw (The Tab, 2024). These high rent prices are present across various types of student housing. Moreover, the 'percentage of beds priced below maximum maintenance loan' was 69.55% in 2025, which is down from 93.01% in 2016 (Cushman and Wakefield, 2025). This shortfall between funding and rent, together with living costs inflation, creates affordability issues.

The City of York Council addresses the issue within York by adopting a proactive but restrictive regulatory approach to housing, particularly regarding HMOs, which are closely associated with student accommodation. Under the Housing Act 2004 framework, York operates both mandatory and additional HMO licensing schemes to ensure safety, amenity standards and proper management of shared housing (City of York Council, 2026). Licensing requirements include compliance with space standards, fire safety regulations and landlord suitability assessments.

In addition to licensing, York has implemented planning controls through an Article 4 Direction covering urban areas. This removes permitted development rights that would normally allow conversion from a family dwelling (Class C3) to a small HMO (Class C4) without planning permission. As a result, new HMOs require explicit approval, enabling the council to manage concentrations and prevent over-clustering in particular neighbourhoods. The policy aims to maintain community balance, protect local amenity and ensure a mix of housing types rather than areas becoming dominated by student properties.

While these controls address concerns from residents about neighbourhood character and housing availability, they also impact housing supply. Restrictions on new HMOs can limit the number of student rental properties entering the market, potentially increasing rents and competition between letting agencies due to demand remaining high. This illustrates the tension between planning objectives, protecting communities and housing types and housing market pressures.

York's wider housing strategy is shaped by the York Local Plan 2017–2033, which aims to deliver approximately 1,200 homes per year with an emphasis on affordable housing and brownfield development. Although this aligns broadly with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), which promotes sustainable development and meeting housing needs, York places stronger emphasis on environmental protection, Green Belt preservation and heritage conservation. These local constraints limit available development land compared to less historically sensitive cities, affecting housing supply.

PRIMARY DATA ANALYSIS

Our analysis found the average monthly rent per person was significantly higher for student properties compared to the York average. Between November 2025 and November 2026, the average rent increase was calculated to be £9.08. This corresponds to a percentage increase of 4.9% for students, compared to an average of 3.9% for the whole York area (Office for National Statistics, 2025). Importantly, this disparity in rent increase has major implications for students' experiences of university.

	2 beds	3 beds	4+ beds
UK Statistics (£)	612	468	464
Student Rents (£)	914	811	815
Increase (£)	302	342	351
% Increase	49	73	76

Table 1: Table comparing the price per person for student properties against overall values for York, for September 2025. UK statistics value for 4+ beds is an overestimate, calculated by assuming each property has 4 bedrooms as no further information is available.

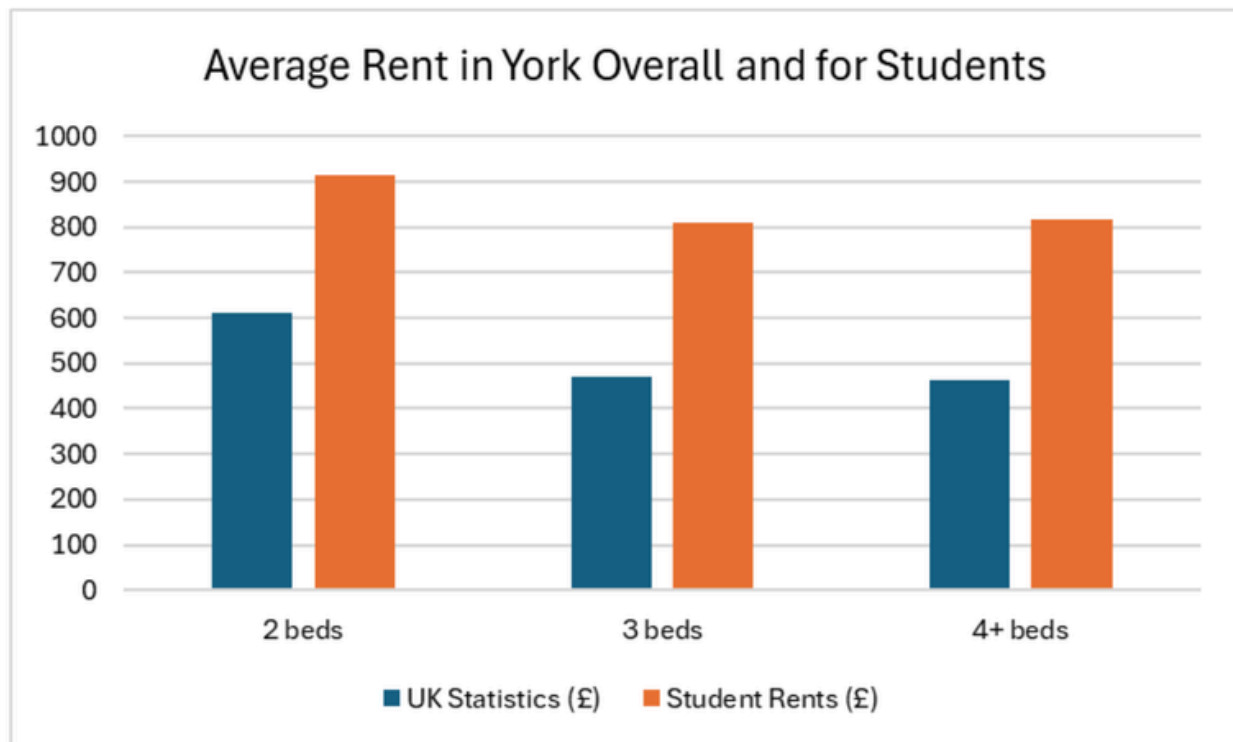


Figure 1: bar graph comparing the price per person for student properties against overall values for York, accounting for bills included for September 2025. UK statistics value for 4+ beds is an overestimate, calculated by assuming each property has 4 bedrooms, as no further information is available.

In addition to HMO rent increases, on-campus accommodation has also seen a rise in prices. Comparison of equivalent rooms at the University of York between the 2024 and 2025 academic years indicated that weekly rent increased by £12.86, equating to a 7.4% increase. This is almost double the average increase of 3.9% for the overall York area for this period. Comparing the equivalent data for York St John gives an average increase in weekly rent of £5.43, equating to a 3.5% increase. Overall, while on campus accommodation for both universities has increased, the University of York's properties have increased by over double that of York St John's properties.

Analysis from the YSTT survey depicts the extent of quality issues within student housing. 66.4% of respondents claimed they experienced quality issues such as pests, mould and damp, with 17.2% of respondents with such issues not having them fixed within a month. Despite inflated rent prices, it is evident that the quality of housing is far from 'good value,' particularly since 35.9% of respondents reported that their housing was 'unaffordable' relative to their maintenance loans. Anecdotal student stories depict living in tumble driers, broken ovens for up to a month and whole rooms not being able to be used within the house. Moreover, over 70% of respondents found the process of obtaining housing to be stressful, as they reported pressure to sign contracts early, limited bargaining power with landlords, and concerns regarding deposit returns. Therefore, given York's relatively small size and constrained housing supply, students face limited alternatives if dissatisfied.

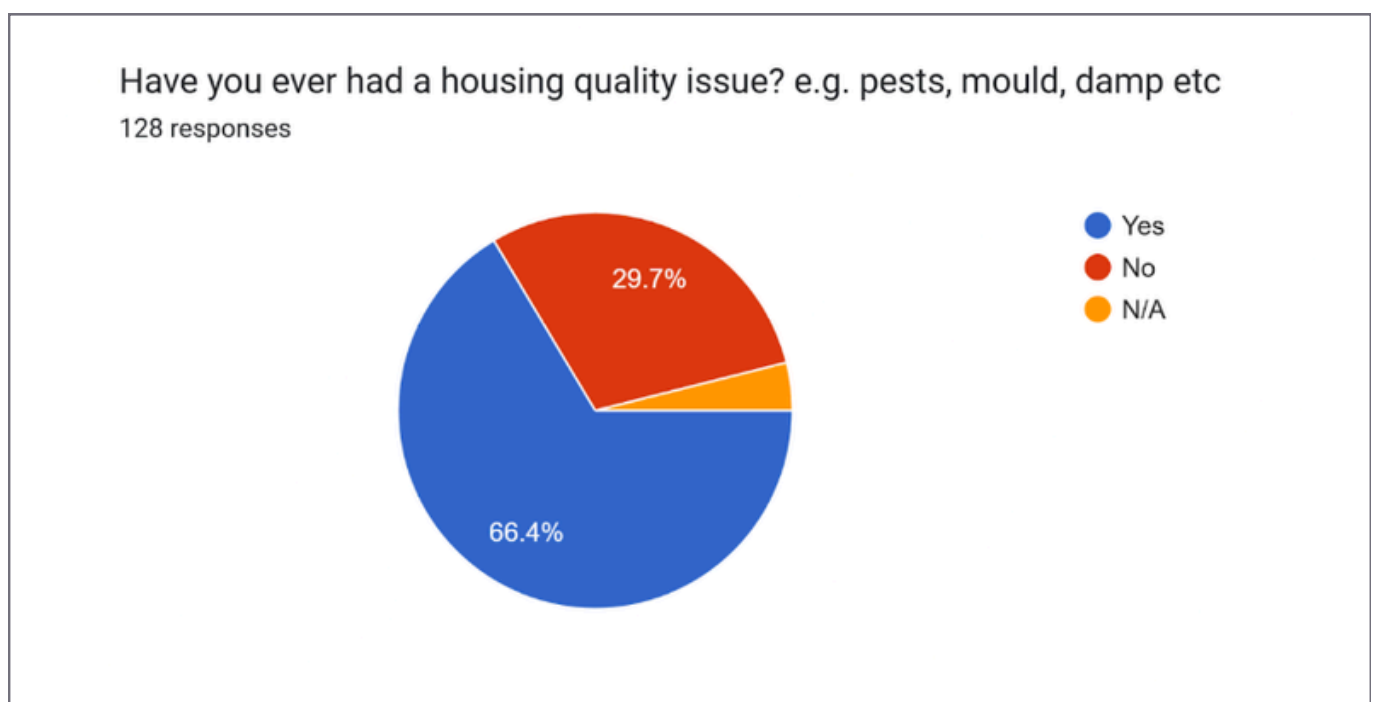


Figure 2: Results of the YSTT Housing Survey showing that a majority of students have experienced issues with housing quality.

IDENTIFYING YORK'S ISSUES

A major tenet of the housing crisis is the vastly-uneven supply-demand relationship within the market as there is immense demand for a depleted supply of HMOs, since they are closely regulated by the council. Through primary and secondary research, this report identifies three key operational and policy problems which significantly contribute to this aspect of the crisis and can be realistically resolved.

Interviews were conducted with Rachel Maskell MP for York Central, in addition to Lewis Parrey, York Students' Union (YorkSU) Union Affairs Officer, and Sam Dickinson, the YorkSU Community and Wellbeing Officer, to gain a comprehensive understanding of various stakeholders' positions. Both SU officers argue that the uneven supply-demand relationship has resulted in letting agencies, and by extension, landlords having a monopoly over housing, leaving students with little choice in the market and having to accept poor value for money. Both Parrey and Dickinson emphasised this poor value of money, arguing that as rent has increased, the quality of housing has not matched this, resulting in poor quality housing for high prices.

1. STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS

York's housing market has a number of notable stakeholders with different interests. The two universities, their students' unions, City of York Council, estate agents and landlords have varying influence in decision-making.

Maskell suggests that consolidation across key stakeholders is absent, resulting in a lack of coherent management of York's housing supply-demand issue. While the University engages with the Council, and the Council engages with estate agents, there is no central forum in which to address the housing crisis.

YorkSU officials Parrey and Dickinson highlight the lack of communication between key stakeholders in York. Despite being elected to represent University of York students, they are excluded from major decisions and discussions which affect student housing outcomes. In order for a cohesive and democratic approach to resolving York's student housing issues, stakeholders need to engage in a centralised forum.

2. RESTRICTIVE HMO LICENSING

The unevenness of supply and demand in York is exacerbated by Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO) licensing. Both Parrey and Dickinson emphasised that the demand for HMOs by students far exceeds the distribution of licences by the City of York Council.

Year	HMO Mandatory Licence	Licence Renewal	Total
2021	43	146	189
2022	44	83	127
2023	70	248	318
2024	33	1	37

Table 2: Table showing the distribution of HMO licences by City of York Council between 2021 and 2025. This data was sourced through an FOI request.

Table 2 shows the limited introduction of new HMO licences in the City of York over the last four years, reflecting the stringent regulation of licensing as part of its wider strategy. Maskell advocates for the social necessity of maintaining these HMO regulations to protect the integrity of 'family streets' and prevent the hollowing out of local communities by student expansion. Nonetheless, the prioritisation of family streets undermines the availability of housing for the student population and contributes to the supply and demand issues highlighted previously.

3. THE PRECEDENCE OF COMMERCIAL INTERESTS

Maskell argues the current housing crisis is driven by market-led developments, as shifts towards private equity and speculative PBSA have commodified housing at the expense of students and residents, particularly equating the depletion of housing to Airbnb properties and the legacy of the 'Right to Buy' scheme. She emphasised the detriment of university partnerships with profit-driven private entities, such as private equity, where the latter is outsourced both materially and financially to develop student accommodation on campus.

Analysis of the financial statements of the contractual partnerships between the university and private equity companies indicated significant causal relationships between the university's contractual obligations and the rent increases of on campus accommodation.



Vita Student PBSA in York (credit: Brick Development Association)

Student Accommodation Provider One LLP and Student Accommodation Provider Two LLP have two members who own 50% each, including the University of York and Vale. Between 2022 and 2025, the rate of return on the original investment was consistently 7%. The average price of on campus accommodation simultaneously increased by 6% over this period, indicating a strong connection between rent increases and the rate of returns on investment. This is significant as it highlights that the university's commercial interests may take greater precedence than once thought.

Furthermore, Student Accommodation Provider Three LLP, which is a wholly owned subsidiary, was found to have a consistent rate of return of 8%. Importantly, the rent increases of Constantine College, which the university also has full ownership of (University of York, 2019. p.53), were 6%, reflecting a disparity between the rent increase and rate of return, which can be attributed to the fact that it has full ownership and is not driven by commercial interests as significantly. Therefore, the commercial interests of the university present in its contractual obligations impacts the affordability of on campus accommodation.



Constantine College (credit: University of York)

CASE STUDY: DURHAM

Durham provides a comprehensive overview of the problems faced by the student housing market, with complaints of rent far exceeding student loans, poor quality housing, and a disparity between university and private-sector housing (Moore, 2025). HMOs housed 7975 of the 17765 students in 2021/22, and are increasingly important to students in the city as the university intake grows. The University and PBSAs in Durham have cultivated a relationship with the HMO market by influencing cost and quality expectations (Durham Students' Union, 2023).



Durham City (credit: This is Durham)

DURHAM'S PROBLEMS

Affordability:

Rent in Durham often far exceeds student maintenance loans, before living costs are even considered (Moore, 2025). Over a third of students have faced difficulties in paying their housing costs (NUS, 2024), with nearly half of students working over 12 hours weekly (Howlett, 2024). Students are being priced out of their degree, and there is a very imminent threat of complete educational inaccessibility in Durham (Porteous, 2025).

Quality:

Durham's student housing is reportedly poor in quality, with students tolerating poor conditions as they are powerless against the market (Moore, 2025). Facing similar complaints as York, 30% faced a lack of water or heating, 15% reported rodent and/or pest problems, and 40% reported that their academic work suffered as a result of housing quality (Durham Students' Union, 2023).

Procedure:

A frequent topic of Durham's student housing market is availability, a problem exacerbated by 'the drop' process. Letting agents release available properties for the next available year in 'the drop', causing a rush to try and get adequate and affordable housing as soon as possible (BBC News, 2022). People sign on to houses without knowing what the quality is like, with people they have only just met, in areas they are unfamiliar with, all of which can adversely affect their student experience in the coming months. In 2022, this process was particularly bad with national news reporting people queuing outside letting agents from 19.30 the night before 'the drop,' signing onto the first houses that became available (BBC News, 2022). Councils are unable to control the will of private landlords beyond the planning process, leaving students suffering from a severe power imbalance.



Durham students queue for 'the drop' (credit: BBC News)

DURHAM'S SOLUTION

To combat the HMO issues, Durham University founded the Durham City Student Lettings Code of Practice, a voluntary Code which demonstrates a commitment to putting students' needs first in the letting process (Durham University, n.d).

The terms of the Code include:

- Working together for a student housing market in Durham which suits the needs of all - students, landlords, residents, and agents
- Not issuing contracts for properties to multiple groups simultaneously and allowing at least 2 working days for students to arrange for contracts to be signed
- Shared commitment to reducing the pressure placed on students and helping eliminate the need for students to queue overnight.

Whilst a list of providers initially committed to the Code of Practice, many letting agents have pulled out after committing, and most providers have not committed at all (Robinson and Denten, 2023; Durham SU, n.d). Councils do not have powers to compel landlords to sign up to the code of practice, and so it remains unenforceable (Durham SU, n.d). Whilst the code is a positive step towards improvement, it is limited by its voluntary and unenforceable nature, leaving the responsibility still lying largely on students to find suitable accommodation.

POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS FOR YORK

This section explores and evaluates a range of potential solutions which address different problems and stakeholders involved.

Each potential policy solution will be evaluated against the following criteria.

Pace:

Solutions will consider how quickly they can be implemented and create meaningful impact, especially considering the timing of the University's academic semesters.

Strategic Impact:

Solutions will consider their impact on students and other stakeholders, justifying their improvement over existing processes.

Feasibility:

Solutions will consider practical, realistic implementation and any potential roadblocks to their success.

1. FORMATION OF A CITY-WIDE BOARD

A potential policy solution is the formation and subsequent governance of a board, where key local stakeholders meet to discuss student housing and commit to a holistic strategy or certain policies. This forum may operate as an official board for making operational commitments and decisions, whilst also formally recognising the gravity of the student housing problem in a meaningful way.

This policy solution would solve the lack of communication between key stakeholders within York, as there would be a singular place where they could all discuss key issues, predominantly housing, which could then be extended to other student-related issues. Additionally, subsequent commitments to operationally managing student housing, such as quality enforcement, may facilitate the allocation of money for this issue within the council's annual budget.

Given the resource requirements in setting up the board and its subsequent governance, this policy solution's impact would be recognised over the long-term, with the potential to see its impact in the academic year 2027/28. This entails a significant limitation because student housing issues may worsen while the board is initially set up. However, the policy solution's strategic impact would be significant as the board would reflect an official commitment from vital actors to work on resolving an issue which affects a high proportion of York's population.

Additionally, the policy solution's feasibility may be limited due to potential conflicts with existing anti-competitive legislation, particularly the Competition Act 1998. One of the board's key stakeholders would be letting agencies, which conflicts with the Act's regulations on anti-competitive agreements between businesses, including market sharing, thereby stifling competition. The board could be at risk of committing anti-competitive practices or losing out on the involvement of letting agencies, who have a significant role in the local student housing market. Yet, this issue could be mitigated by addressing it within the board's terms of reference, where topics such as price fixing could be distinguished as outside the board's remit. The policy solution's feasibility may also be hindered with the resources required to govern the board, in addition to questions surrounding ownership of the board to ensure it is both implemented and sustained.

2. ESTABLISH A CODE OF PRACTICE

Furthermore, another policy solution is to implement a code of practice following the initial set up of the forum itself, which various stakeholders would agree to enact and follow as a mode of best practice. Such an option follows a similar approach to that established in Durham during the 2022/23 academic year, following a deteriorated housing crisis. Within this code of practice, commitments may involve improving the quality of housing, and permitting longer amounts of time for students to decide on signing. Other, more general commitments may also include committing to working collaboratively with other stakeholders in mind.

Whilst the establishment of a code of practice is significant, questions remain over its feasibility in terms of its enforcement, since no local form of government can legally oversee this, as the code of practice would not be legally binding and instead just strictly voluntary. Because of this nature, the code of practice could face similar issues experienced in Durham, where the practice's adherence by pertinent stakeholders was not sufficient.

The pace of this policy solution is also weakened by the fact that this would be a product of the housing forum, and therefore, commitments could take a while to form, due to the different stakeholder interests within the forum. However, this could be mitigated by the fact that the commitments are not binding, as well as stakeholder recognition of the benefits behind effective collaboration to address the crisis as efficiently as possible.

Moreover, the impact of the policy solution is very significant, as it represents key commitments to addressing key student issues, and in doing so, recognises the value of students to the city of York by seeking to help them obtain value for money, particularly within a wider cost of living crisis, which housing makes up a significant proportion of. This solution may also set a precedent for allocating sufficient resources within the local council's budget to enforce quality standards, and in doing so, enhancing local forms of operational regulation.

3. EXPANSION OF STUDENTS' UNION LOBBYING EFFORTS

Furthermore, another policy solution is greater action from the SU on student housing, in addition to targeted lobbying towards the University Council regarding transparency. Although the SU has adequately responded to the housing crisis, such as the 2025 Housing Hell campaign and Housing Fairs, it is evident that further action could be taken to support students during the housing crisis. Greater, yet realistic action centres on the SU advocating for greater transparency within the University itself, particularly surrounding its commercial relations, and the influence they may have on pertinent decisions such as prices of university accommodation and student numbers.

This would solve the issue of a lack of student awareness surrounding the university's various relations and interests, and in doing so, create a better-informed student population. Furthermore, greater support for students may centre on a collaboration between Student House Finder and the SU, where students can directly access real-time information about the local housing market. DurhamSU's Housing Matters page provides a good example of a practical implementation. This would reflect a greater commitment to bettering student experiences, as the SU would be committing to improving student knowledge of both their rights and the local housing market as they search for housing.

This policy solution aligns very closely with the forthcoming Union Affairs Officer Sam Dickinson's commitment to make the SU more political, as sabbatical officers would be more vocal by advocating for greater transparency from the University Council. Additionally, since the means to obtain data about housing currently exists in Student Housing Finder's website, few resources would be required in setting up these means, further reflecting the solution's ability to be efficiently enacted. Due to the targeted focus on a singular stakeholder, the collaboration and lobbying required can be done over the summer vacation period, before both the 26/27 academic year.

The solution's strategic impact would be highly significant, as it would put into action the SU's recognition of the housing crisis, instead of purely signposting information and increasing student awareness of their situations. Both lobbying and heightened awareness enable the SU to undertake realistic and meaningful action, which addresses stressful housing searches and a lack of transparency behind rising university accommodation prices.



University of York Students' Union Logo (credit: YorkSU)

3. IMPLEMENT A UNIVERSITY-SU BOARD

Another potential policy solution is to implement a university board between the University Council and the SU, where negotiations and discussions can take place on accommodation prices for first-years, returners and post-graduate students. This solution would solve the limited ability for sabbatical officers to advance student interests on price changes, as a formal setting would be facilitated for these discussions to occur.

Historically, the SU have had success in negotiating with the University Council; in the academic year 2024/25, Parrey was able to negotiate with University Leadership to increase prices at a lower rate of 5-6%, compared to the original increase of 9% (York Vision, 2025). This indicates the feasibility of the policy solution, as previous successes reflect the strength of the SU's position. Yet, this solution may be limited by the predominance of the university's financial situation in recent years, where financial statements have detailed a deficit of £9 million from July 2023 to July 2024, with an aim to reach a £40 million operating surplus by 2026 (University of York, 2024). This may result in the forum's discussions having poor outcomes in benefitting students, as the financial situation takes greater predominance.

Moreover, the policy solution can be implemented with a strong degree of pace, as the board can be set up during the summer vacation period before the beginning of the 26/27 academic year, with a view to operating from September onwards. Indeed, this would align with the timeline of student housing, as university accommodation prices can be consulted and set as other types of student housing become available for the forthcoming academic year. Yet, the impact of the policy solution is limited by the fact it solely addresses university accommodation prices, and does not account for other types of student housing such as HMOs or PBSAs.

3. INTRODUCE RENT CONTROLS FOR PBSAS

The final policy solution is to introduce rent control specifically targeted at the Purpose-Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) market. To establish a concrete baseline, this draws upon the NUS proposal of an affordability target requiring 25% of units to be available at 50% of the maximum student maintenance loan (NUS:2015; as cited in Rugg and Rhodes, 2018). To enforce this, York Council should set strict affordable bed requirements for new PBSAs. Furthermore, aligning with the Generation Rent (2014) flexible control model, a rent cap would be calculated as a percentage of the understood property values used for council tax. To allow more flexibility for landlords, the cap would not be absolute, but landlords who charge above the cap or fail to meet the target quota would face a 50% surcharge on their properties, with these funds injected directly back into the local council.

The solution's feasibility is illustrated in its targeted regulation towards the PBSA market, mitigating the risk of a mass exit of private landlords. This is indicative of PBSA's position as a growing sector which attracts heavy investment, thereby allowing it to resist the disincentives to supply imposed by rent control. There were 743,000 bed spaces provided through PBSAs ahead of the 2025/26 academic year, including 18,200 new beds, 660 of those being in York.

This represents a net gain of 10,000 from 2024/25, which is more than the previous two years but still below pre-pandemic levels. Additionally, there are 174,335 PBSA beds in the development pipeline, with 27,972 of them expected to be ready for 2026/27 delivery, representing a move closer to pre-pandemic levels.

The strategic impact of the policy solution is limited to just PBSAs, meaning HMOs and other types of student accommodation would not be directly affected. This is an important distinction because it may be easy for these properties to leave the student market and pivot to the wider PRS with no barriers to entry. Subsequently, competition with rent-controlled PBSAs will apply downward pressure on prices in the wider PRS, pushing HMO landlords to either compete through lower prices or through improved quality. While this proposal is specifically designed to mitigate risks to the overall housing supply, this report maintains that this policy should only be implemented after growth in the PBSA sector has fully returned to pre-pandemic levels.

The solution's impact is limited due to rent controls largely centring on stabilising rent, which is largely irrelevant to the student housing market, since it is designed to improve security for long-term renters rather than lower initial costs for those struggling to enter the market. Furthermore, because student tenancies typically last only one academic year, students are rarely exposed to the in-tenancy rent hikes that stabilisation is built to prevent. In contrast, 'first-generation' rent ceilings directly tackle affordability by capping rent costs. Moreover, lost profits may incentivise landlords to leave the Private Rented Sector, which would cause further problems, especially for students.

FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

SHORT-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations should be actioned in the next six months and implemented before the beginning of the University's 2026-27 academic year. They require reduced external stakeholder collaboration but set a strong precedent for wider, longer-term improvement.

Recommendation 1:

The formation of a university board centred around setting university accommodation prices for first-years, returners and post-graduates. This can be implemented easily in the short-term as it does not require external stakeholder engagement, and can create a tangible impact for incoming students in the 2026/27 housing cycle. It will provide YorkSU with a direct forum by which to represent student interests, holding the University accountable against their commercial interests.

Recommendation 2:

York SU should undertake greater action in supporting students during the housing crisis, by advocating for transparency from the University on its commercial interests, and providing more information on the housing market for students. It should establish a webpage in collaboration with Student House Finder to provide accurate information surrounding the York housing market, similar to DurhamSU's Housing Matters webpage.

LONG-TERM RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations should be enacted within the next five years, whilst acknowledging the various interests of certain stakeholders

Recommendation 3:

The HMO licensing route should be streamlined by the City of York Council, by combining the HMO license and C4 service, as one package that can be clearly obtained. This may encourage greater HMO licensing within the parameters set out by the Council, making the supply-demand relationship more uneven.

Recommendation 4:

A governance board should be established between key stakeholders in the city of York, including letting agencies, the university and the local council, to enable effective collaboration in resolving aspects of the crisis that can realistically be resolved. By bringing all pertinent stakeholders, the governance board recognises the extent of the housing crisis, with pre-emptive action to mitigate the crisis from worsening.

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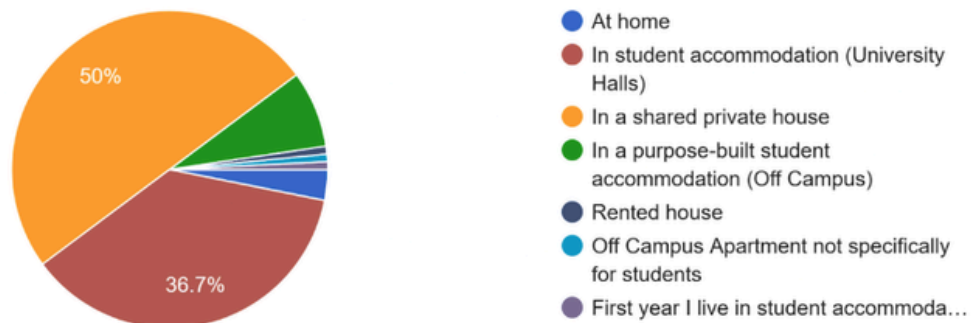
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APPENDIX

Responses to the YSTT's Student Survey 2025:

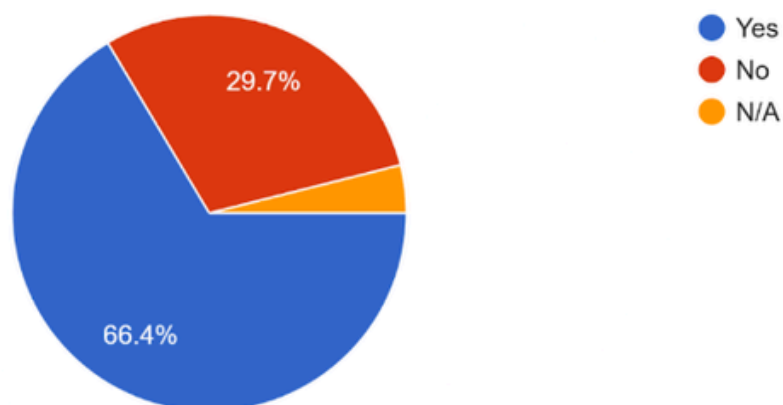
Where do you live during term time?

128 responses



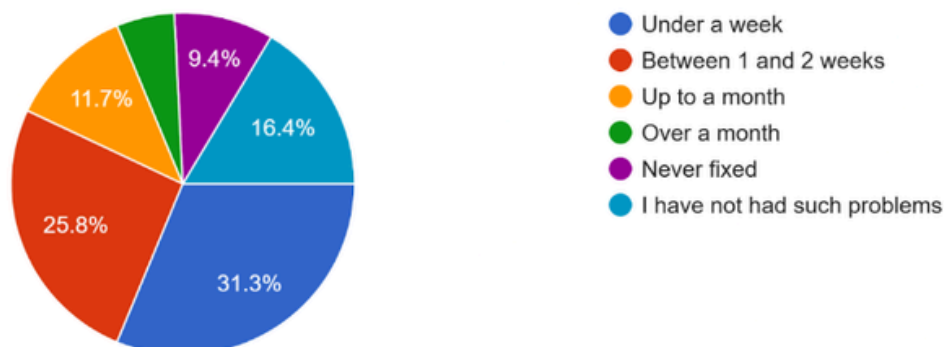
Have you ever had a housing quality issue? e.g. pests, mould, damp etc

128 responses



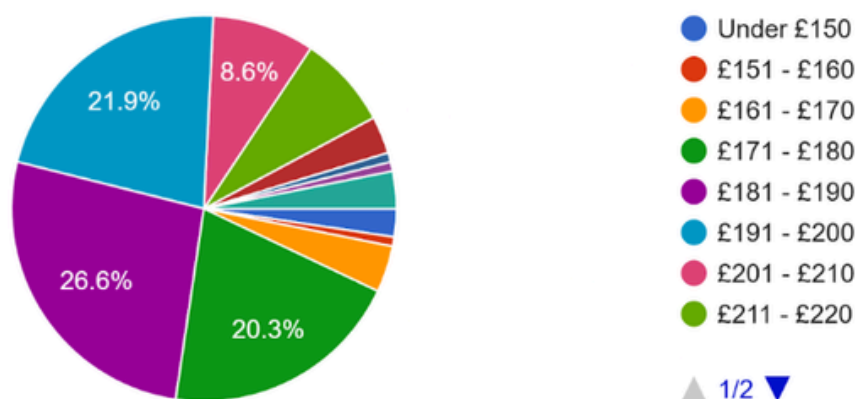
If you experience a problem in your house (i.e. something that needs repair or pest control), how long would it take your landlord to fix it?

128 responses



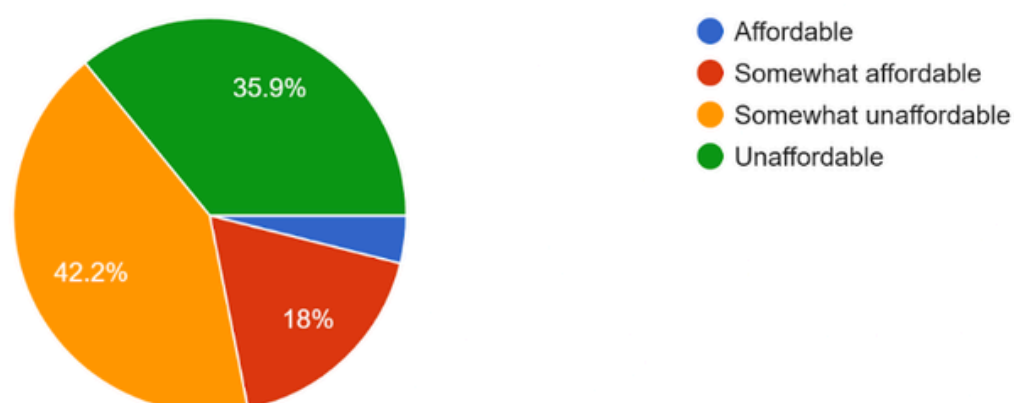
If you live away from home, how much do you pay in rent (per week including bills)

128 responses



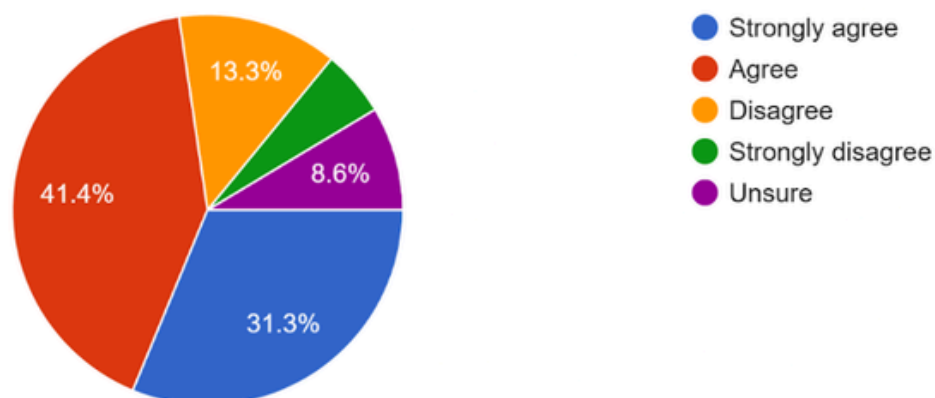
How would you rate the affordability of your accommodation?

128 responses



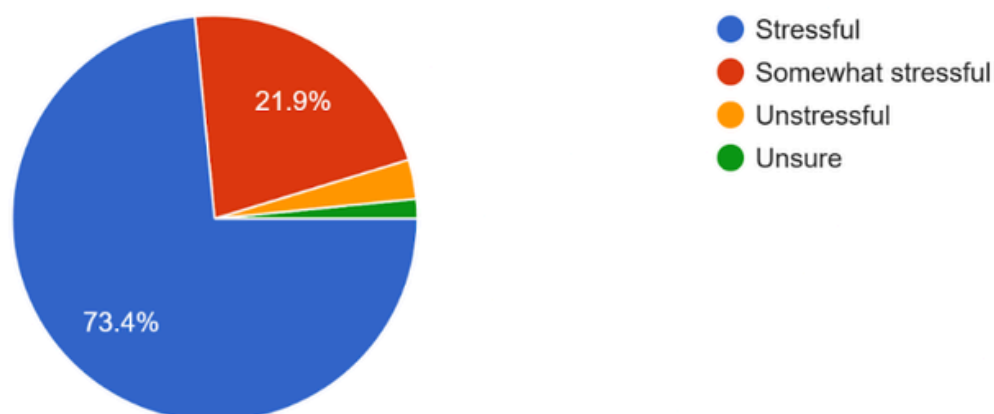
Has your rent negatively impacted your student experience?

128 responses



How would you describe the house-finding process?

128 responses



Data on Houses in Multiple Occupation courtesy of City of York Council via Freedom of Information (FOI) request.

Any queries for access, please contact thinktank@yorksu.org.

Data about York housing prices between 2024 to 2025 courtesy of Student House Finder (<https://student-house-finder.co.uk>)

Any queries for access, please contact George Howarth (george@student-house-finder.co.uk).

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