

**Student housing
options and
experiences of
homelessness in
Scotland: a report by
the Cross-Party
Group on Housing**

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Foreword by Graham Simpson MSP

The Scottish Government declared a housing emergency in May of this year. While this is a crisis that affects people across Scotland, the students who study at our colleges and universities can often be overlooked.

Last year, the Cross-Party Group on Housing was attended by representatives from the Edinburgh Student Housing Co-operative (ESHC). They put their views on student housing and homelessness in Scotland to the Housing Minister, Paul McLennan. Like many of our members, I was very interested in what they had to say and met with them subsequently. I also met with Slurp, another Edinburgh-based student housing advocacy group.

The CPG met again in February at the Crisis headquarters for a timely discussion about homelessness. Once again, the experience of students was highlighted by representatives from Slurp and ESHC.

A short-life working group was subsequently formed to examine this topic in more detail. This report builds on these discussions and the expertise of the short-life working group. It considers the current shortage of student housing in Scotland, where gaps in our knowledge of the student housing market are, and the different forms of student housing that are available to students in Scotland.

We have come up with a set of recommendations for the Government that are clear and challenging. These include the need for a collaborative approach to student housing, more robust data on student accommodation, and the integration of student housing into local housing strategies. We are also calling for city-wide one stop shops to guide students in making informed housing choices. Overall, there is insufficient suitable and affordable accommodation for students in Scotland and the Scottish Government must take more action to address this.

Can I thank everyone who gave evidence to the short life working group and at our CPG meetings. Their expertise and insight has been invaluable. Special thanks also to our secretariat, Gareth James, who has pulled together this report. As with previous reports, we will send this to the Government for a response.

Graham Simpson MSP, Convenor

Student homelessness in Scotland

There is a shortage of student housing in Scotland. This is due to rising student numbers and the slow growth of purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA). Rising higher education (HE) costs and a lack of affordable housing options contribute to student housing insecurity and homelessness.

Increased participation in HE has worsened these pressures. International students face additional challenges such as guarantor requirements and a lack of family support. PBSA developments are often high-end and can price out students with limited economic resources.

The inflow of students in certain areas can lead to tension with residents, negative societal perceptions, and policies that marginalise student renters. Other structural issues include limited tenancy lengths, unaffordable rents, and discrimination against students by landlords.

Many students may be engaged in hidden homelessness behaviours like sofa-surfing due to stigma and inadequate support. This makes it difficult to gauge the extent of the issue.

Current situation in Scotland

Aberdeen

- Total students in 2022/23: 31,285 (24,355 full-time, 6930 part-time). 13,030 full-time students commuted; 11,325 needed rental accommodation.
- PBSA supply in 2022/23: 8,129 bedspaces. Indicating a slight **oversupply** which assume some students will continue to opt for HMO PRS. New PBSA developments may further increase oversupply.
- 35% of full-time students were owner-occupiers in 2022/23, different from Dundee, Edinburgh, and Glasgow.

Dundee

- 22,200 students in 2022/23, with 14,060 seeking rental accommodation.
- PBSA supply: 3,289 bedspaces, a **shortfall of 6,084 bedspaces**.
- New developments are beginning to ease pressures, but more is needed and affordability remains a concern.

Edinburgh

- 73,045 students in 2022/23, with a **shortfall of 13,852 PBSA bedspaces**.
- Growing opposition to PBSA developments due to prioritisation over affordable housing. Many students are forced to work long hours, impacting well-being.

Glasgow

- 90,030 students in 2022/23, with a **shortfall of 6,093 PBSA bedspaces**.
- 31% of students live with parents or guardians.

- Some improvements and pipeline should plug gap, but affordability and demand for PBSA still challenge the market.

Highlands and Islands

- UHI manages 420 bedspaces but struggles with low occupancy, except in Fort William and Dornoch.
- Challenges in student recruitment due to housing issues and high cost of living.
- Youth outmigration and recruitment issues threaten the sustainability of higher education in the region.

Knowledge gaps

There is insufficient data on student demographics and their housing needs. There is uncertainty in projecting student numbers, especially due to the volatile international student market. This creates challenges for universities and local authorities when it comes to planning for student accommodation.

There are significant gaps in reporting and monitoring student homelessness in Scotland. Students are often underrepresented in homelessness statistics, complicating efforts to provide support.

Ambiguity exists around who is responsible for addressing student homelessness. There is a lack of coordination between universities, local authorities and other providers regarding student housing.

There is incomplete data on student housing market trends, especially regarding landlord behaviour, vacancy rates, and the impact of regulatory changes. The scale at which landlords may be shifting from student lets to other uses is as yet unclear.

There are data gaps in relation to **rent levels, student incomes,** and the **specific needs** of different student groups. There is also limited data on the **quality** of student housing. Overall, there is insufficient understanding of student housing choices which can affect housing decisions.

Forms of student housing

PBSA

Comprised of university-maintained halls and private PBSA. The former offers support, community and proximity to campus but may leave students vulnerable during summer breaks. The latter offers modern amenities but tends to be expensive.

PRS and HMOs

Provide flexible and independent living options but vary in quality. Issues like short tenancies, unresponsive landlords and exploitation are common. HMOs may contribute to community tensions.

Social landlords

Social housing offers affordability and security but is in limited supply. Challenges include competing housing needs, funding constraints and location. Successful examples include Jim Stephen House and Derwent Students, both in Glasgow.

Cooperative housing models

Student housing cooperatives such as the Edinburgh Student Housing Cooperative offer affordable, democratic and community-driven living. Replicating this model faces challenges in funding and policy support.

Conclusions and recommendations

Addressing student housing insecurity and homelessness requires a joined-up approach between universities, councils, housing providers, students, local communities and the Scottish Government.

There is need for comprehensive and robust data on student accommodation, including market trends, affordability, and HMO provision, to understand imbalances and guide decisions. Analysis of demographic, economic and behavioural factors influencing student housing choices will improve understanding of market shifts in sectors like PBSA and HMOs.

Student housing must be integrated into local housing strategies, as developments like PBSA impact cities and communities and affect the wider housing system. A systems thinking approach is key to addressing student housing insecurity and homelessness in Scotland. This requires analysing the student accommodation market in relation to its broader impacts on local housing systems, communities, and stock opportunities.

Non-profit, city-wide one stop shops for students should be established to guide them to the most appropriate housing option.

We have done our best to establish an accurate picture on student housing across Scotland but there is a lack of robust data which should be addressed by the Scottish Government and councils. This would help them to set priorities to ensure that students are properly catered for. The supply of student housing must be increased and must be made more affordable.