

# The experiences of University of York Students in the Private Rented Sector

A case study of the private rented sector in the  
'traditional market' for University of York students

**citizens  
advice**

**York**



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This research was funded by the Two Ridings Community Foundation via their 'Vital York Step Change' programme. This programme was funded by Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Mr Jonah Hebron, who began the research project as Coordinator for Research and Campaigns at Citizens Advice, without whom, the full completion of the report would not have been possible. We would also like to thank Citizens Advice York volunteers, Ms Jess O'Sullivan and Mr Joe Lacock, for their continued assistance throughout the project from initial concept discussions and survey design, to the final write up.

# Executive Summary

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The student housing market comprises three major sources of accommodation, with some degree of blurring between those providers. Universities themselves provide accommodation, sometimes directly and sometimes in collaboration with larger-scale commercial providers. Commercial providers also directly let to the student market through purpose built student accommodation (PBSA). This element of the industry has grown rapidly over the last ten years, with an estimated 600,000 units provided across the UK. Accommodation is also available in the 'traditional' housing market, largely comprising shared properties let by portfolio or pension landlords. It is the experiences of students in this 'traditional' market that we have focused on in this research - what Rugg and Rhodes (2018) categorise as the 'student submarket'.

For students, as for other renters, the Private Rented Sector (PRS) relies on regulation of the relationship between landlord (agent or independent) and tenant at the level of the individual tenancy agreement. For this to be an effective regulatory framework, renters and landlords have to be aware of their rights and obligations, and they have to be able and willing to exercise and enforce those rights (Marsh and Gibb, 2019: 18). The student submarket is particularly

vulnerable because renters are transient and only stay in properties for a short period of time. In addition, surveys nationally suggest that a significant minority of tenants would not be willing to make a complaint to their landlord for fear of suffering retaliatory eviction (ibid: 19).

Against this backdrop and the growing student numbers in York, we wanted to explore the experiences of students within the PRS - a sector that is under increasing pressure and where standards and levels of security often fall below the other types of tenures. For our purposes, it was important to understand what York's student submarket currently looks like, as well as explore how we can support students to feel sufficiently secure in their tenancy, to assert their rights. We wanted to explore ways of increasing the level of awareness, both for students and landlords/letting agents, of their rights and obligations. We also wanted to explore a collective approach to incentivising landlords/letting agents in fulfilling their obligations - including working with the City Council to ensure powers are being used proactively.

It is important to acknowledge that there are many good quality landlords letting properties in York's

# Executive Summary

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PRS; we came across a number of positive stories from students during the course of the research. Nonetheless, the report that follows demonstrates significant levels of dissatisfaction from respondents about their lived experiences as tenants. There is great diversity within the student submarket; this report and the conclusions that follow are not intended to be taken as an over-simplification of the PRS in York. However, this work does indicate that student experiences and conditions within the PRS should be a cause for concern for the University of York, landlords and agents, the City of York Council and students.

This research underpinning this report was undertaken before the Covid-19 pandemic and a period that if anything, has shone a light on some of the particular vulnerabilities that students and others in the private rented sector face. Whilst short-term Government interventions, such as the evictions ban have provided invaluable protections, the pandemic has exposed and exacerbated wider systemic problems. Some of these challenges, such as the lack of rights for private sector tenants, combined with an unwillingness or fear of enforcing the rights that they do have, are common across the whole private rented sector. Other challenges remain particularly relevant for

students, for example those frustrated to be paying rents for accommodation they were unable to use, or trapped into financial liabilities from contracts signed many months before tenancy periods were due to commence, in one of the unique factors that defines the student rental market.

This period has also emphasised the importance of our homes, with sudden restrictions on movement turning homes into places of refuge to see out the disruption of the pandemic, as well as transforming them into places of study and work. If anything, the transitions of the past year emphasize the importance of ensuring the provision of decent homes and a consistent approach to addressing quality standards.

## Key Findings

- Around 80% of University of York students spend a greater proportion of their income on accommodation than the average UK private renter. £437 per month is the mean rent cost for University of York students in the private rented sector (this is likely an underestimate of the true value).
- 57% of students received financial support from parents to pay for their accommodation; nationally

# Executive Summary

this number is 48% (Save the Student, 2019).

- 52% of students struggle to pay their rent occasionally, sometimes, often, or always.
- 47% of respondents said repairs had not been carried out by their landlord or letting agent in a reasonable timeframe.
- Many students also reported potential category 1 hazards, for example, 31% of students reported pest or insect infestations and 16% had experienced gas, electricity, or fire hazards. Significant others reported substandard conditions with indicators of 'non-decency' including tenant overcrowding (15%), mould on floor or carpets (18%), damaged windows or doors (24%), damaged flooring (30%), draughty windows or doors (39%), missing or damaged furniture (42%), faulty or missing appliances (43%), unwanted items from previous tenants (44%) and mould on walls or windows (57%).
- 86% feel there is pressure to secure a property: 68% say this pressure comes from other students and 52% say it comes from the landlord or letting agent.
- Students were more likely to be satisfied with private

accommodation if they began searching in the later half of the year (October-March: 24% satisfaction rate, April -September: 40% satisfaction rate).

- International students struggle to pay rent (at least occasionally) just as frequently as students domiciled in the UK (47% and 51% respectively).
- 27% of students said accommodation issues have made them mentally unwell.
- University of York students want higher minimum legal standards for the condition of accommodation (69%), an online rating system for landlords and letting agents (67%) and more legal advice for helping to challenge bad practice from landlords (61%).

## Recommendations

The report makes a series of recommendations, for the University of York, the City of York Council (CYC) and for students.

- **A strategic city-wide approach.** We would like to see all of these stakeholders work together to develop a collaborative student accommodation strategy.

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## **We would like to see the City of York Council:**

1. Introduce an additional licensing scheme that would ensure more students in York are housed in well-managed properties that we know are meeting basic health and safety standards.
2. Make information available online, specifically for students.

## **We would like to see the University of York:**

1. Support students to understand and enforce their rights by providing or helping to source additional funding, for example within CAY or the York Law Clinic, for housing law specialists.
2. Develop a systematic education campaign to inform students about their housing rights and where they can access support.
3. Establish an online service, supported by York Law School (YLS) and the York Law Clinic, to provide support at each stage of the tenancy process: contract checking, resolving disputes, disrepair issues, and deposit return.

## **We recommend that students:**

1. Don't rent yet; start searching for PRS accommodation in February at the very earliest
2. Learn their rights as tenants, and seek out advice from groups such as York Law Clinic and Citizen's Advice York.

# Introduction

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This research has been led by Citizens Advice York (CAY) and carried out in partnership with the University of York Students' Union (YUSU). Whilst YUSU hosted and promoted the survey - designed by CAY - CAY has taken the lead on analysing the data and generating the key findings in this report. YUSU has collaborated with CAY on the writing and development of recommendations.

The aim of this research has been to better understand the experiences and perceptions of University of York students living in the private rented sector (PRS). A survey was distributed to students covering a range of topics, including the cost and quality of accommodation, the pressure felt by students to secure a property, the impact of accommodation experiences on health, the experiences of international students specifically, and finally, what students think could be done to improve the PRS in York.

The report starts by setting out the distinctive and changing contexts of the student housing market, nationally and locally. This is followed by the two main sections. Firstly, the results of the survey are presented and analysed. Secondly we look at 'what next?': exploring what students think would improve their experiences of the PRS. Based on these findings, we critically examine

the current provision at the University of York for students living in the PRS and explore possible interventions the University, Council, and third sector could deliver to improve York's PRS. This includes legal advice for students experiencing problems, voluntary accreditation and consumer mechanisms. In conclusion, we press for a strategic and collective approach involving the University of York (supported by York St John), City of York Council, the students' unions and students themselves.

## Context

The student housing market comprises three major sources of accommodation, with some degree of blurring between those providers. Universities themselves provide accommodation, sometimes directly and sometimes in collaboration with larger-scale commercial providers. Commercial providers also directly let to the student market, for example Vita Student, which is an example of purpose built student accommodation (PBSA). This element of the industry has grown rapidly over the last ten years, with an estimated 600,000 units provided across the UK. Accommodation is also available in the 'traditional' housing market, largely comprising shared properties let by portfolio or pension landlords. It is the experiences of students in this 'traditional' market that we



# Introduction

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have focused on in this research - what [Rugg and Rhodes \(2018\)](#) categorise as the 'student submarket'.

Pressure placed on rental markets in student cities has been increasing for decades. Total student numbers have doubled since 1992 ([Office for National Statistics, 2016](#)) and since the cap on student numbers was lifted in 2015/16, the population continues to rise. In York, as is the case across the UK, this growth in the student submarket has led to widespread concern about uncontrolled growth not balanced by better planning and regulation of quality and conditions (Gibb et al, 2018: 56). Moreover, the rise of PBSA and increasing student numbers in cities such as York ([University of York student population has risen from 16,390 in 2015/2016 to 18,740 in 2018/19](#)) has led to increasing concerns about affordability, value for money and supply.

Typical rents in the UK's PRS student sub-market are highly variable, for example in the North East the median weekly rent is £104, compared to £127 across England as a whole ([Rugg & Rhodes, 2018](#)). Overall, the supply of more affordable units has declined; in 2011/2012, average rent made up 58% of the maximum student loan available. By 2018/19, this figure had grown to 73% ([NUS & Unipol, 2018](#)). Furthermore, in 2018, only 19% of units

in the student accommodation market, nationally, were available at the level of 50% of the maximum student maintenance loan of £4,200. This means on average, a student tenant signing up for a full contract term in 2018/19 will have paid £376 more than for equivalent accommodation in the previous year (ibid.).

In terms of the quality of accommodation, it is well documented that the proportion of homes meeting the 'Decent Homes Standard' is lower in the PRS compared with other principal tenures ([Rugg and Rhodes, 2018](#)). Moreover, according to data published by the City of York Council in [A Healthier Future](#) (2016-2021 housing strategy), 23% of the private rented stock in York has one or more category 1 hazard (hazards that present a serious and immediate risk to a person's health and safety). Although this is lower than the national average (nationally, 27% of all PRS properties were judged to be non-decent in 2017: English Housing Condition Survey - seen in [Rugg and Rhodes, 2018](#)), it's not clear from available Council data whether the figure is substantially higher for certain stock e.g. the student submarket.

Whilst the PRS - including the student submarket - has evolved substantially over the last decade, policy in England is, to some extent, in the process of catching up

# Introduction

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with Scotland and Wales (*[Marsh and Gibb, 2019](#)*). While the changes have been relatively piecemeal so far (ibid.), there are indications that the Government is starting to take a more strategic and far-reaching approach to reform - e.g. the advent of the '*[Homes \(Fitness For Human Habitation\) Act 2018](#)*' and the proposed 'Renters Reform Bill, which was announced in the Queen's speech in December 2019.

For students, as for other renters, the PRS relies on regulation of the relationship between landlord (agent or independent) and tenant at the level of the individual tenancy agreement. For this to be an effective regulatory framework, renters and landlords have to be aware of their rights and obligations, and they have to be able and willing to exercise and enforce those rights (*[Marsh and Gibb, 2019: 18](#)*). The student submarket is particularly vulnerable because renters are transient and only stay in properties for a short period of time. In addition, surveys nationally suggest that a significant minority of tenants would not be willing to make a complaint to their landlord for fear of suffering retaliatory eviction (ibid: 19).

Against this backdrop and the growing student numbers in York, we wanted to explore the experiences of students within the PRS - a sector that is under increasing pressure

and where standards and levels of security often fall below the other types of tenures. For our purposes, it was important to understand what York's student submarket currently looks like, as well as explore how we can support students to feel sufficiently secure in their tenancy, to assert their rights. We wanted to explore ways of increasing the level of awareness, both for students and landlords/letting agents, of their rights and obligations. We also wanted to explore a collective approach to incentivising landlords/letting agents in fulfilling their obligations - including working with the City Council to ensure powers are being used proactively.

# Data Collection

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CAB and YUSU launched an open survey to collect both quantitative and qualitative information on the experiences of students in York's PRS. We asked questions relating to finances, rent costs, housing conditions, the service provided by the landlord and letting agents (hereafter L/LA), the pressure to secure accommodation, the impact accommodation issues have on health, and what students think could be done to improve their experiences.

Data was collected only from students who rent (or had recently rented) via a private L/LA, as opposed to university owned accommodation or PBSA. These students were of particular interest as studies exploring students' voices and experiences in the PRS are uncommon. We were also interested in the impacts of asymmetric power dynamics between L/LA and renters in the student submarket.

The survey, which was open from 15th June-2nd August 2019, received 623 responses from those in PRS accommodation, including: 481 undergraduates, 96 postgraduates, 4 foundation students, 151 students 23 years old or older, 54 international students from outside the European Union (EU) and 46 international students from inside the EU. The survey was emailed directly to

all University of York students by YUSU, which meant our entire target population had the opportunity to complete the survey. While the data has not been weighted, we believe the full spectrum of experiences of University of York students in the PRS have been represented. It should also be noted other higher education providers in York were not surveyed; therefore the data likely reflects those renting predominantly in the electoral wards of Hull Road, Fishergate, and Fulford.

Following the conclusion of the survey, a thematic analysis was undertaken on the free text responses from students. We grouped the qualitative responses on the basis of associated survey questions, which clearly described a particular PRS issue. For example, all the qualitative data from questions relating to money (rent cost, income proportion spent on rent etc.) were grouped together as a theme. For bivariate and multivariate data analysis, the dependent variable was always kept in its corresponding theme - e.g. the impact of high rents on health is found under 'health'.

One question in particular: "Do you have anything else you wish to add about your experience of being a private student renter in York?" traversed every theme, because it contained a variety of qualitative testimonies

# Data Collection

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on a range of topics. It was also the basis of the theme 'International student experience', where responses have explicitly mentioned events that have been influenced by respondents' international student status.

'Condition, repairs, and abuse' focused on the quality of accommodation and the quality of L/LA management before and after the tenancy. 'Pressure to secure a property' included data regarding the origins of pressure and its implications. And finally, the 'health' theme centred on the variables associated with poor health standards. These five themes are followed by a critical discussion of 'what next?', which explores the current University of York provision for students in the PRS, the action students want to see, and what we think could and should be done, based on the evidence we've collected and evidence from literature on the private rented housing sector.

# Results

**“[Accommodation] has been by far the worst part of what was an amazing 4 years in York”**

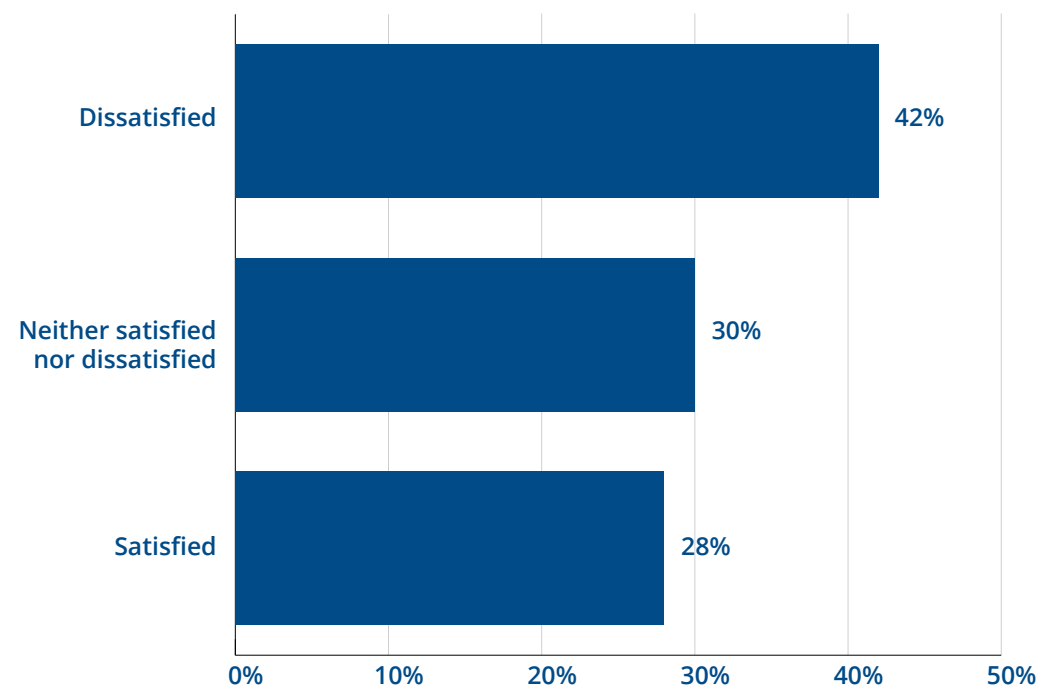
*(Katie, 3rd year)*

The survey results show University of York students are more likely to be dissatisfied with their experiences of accommodation in York than satisfied. Almost half (42%) of respondents said they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their experiences of accommodation in York, whereas 30% were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied. Only 28% said they were satisfied.

The following sections identify possible factors for students’ high levels of dissatisfaction with private rented housing in York:

1. Finances and rent
2. Conditions, repairs, and abuse
3. Pressure to secure a property
4. International student experience
5. Health

**How satisfied are you, overall, with your experience of renting privately as a student in York?**



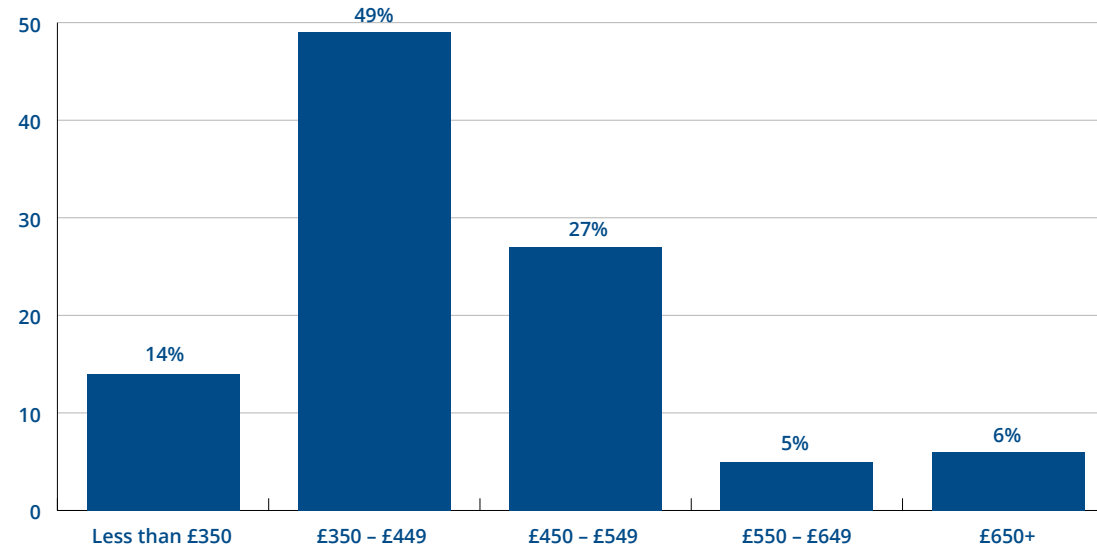
# Finances and Rent

University of York students were asked how much rent they pay on a monthly basis, what proportion of their income this takes up, how they finance these payments, and whether they have difficulty making these payments.

For monthly rent cost, the most common response was £400 per month. However, the median was £411 and the mean much higher at £437. This suggests while York may have a large supply of housing at ~£400pcm, there is more stock that costs above £450 than there is at £350 or below. The graph below shows responses more heavily weighted to rent prices at £450 and above than £350 and below. Three quarters of participating students (76%) said they spend between £350 and £549 a month on rent. At the bottom end of the scale, 14% of students pay less than £350 per month. At the top end, 6% of students are spending over £650 per month.

We believe this is an underestimation of what students in York are paying landlords and agents, since we asked for a monthly figure rather than the more familiar weekly value, which is more common in the student submarket. This is significant because some students may have estimated their monthly rent by multiplying

How much do you pay, on average, for rent on a monthly basis?

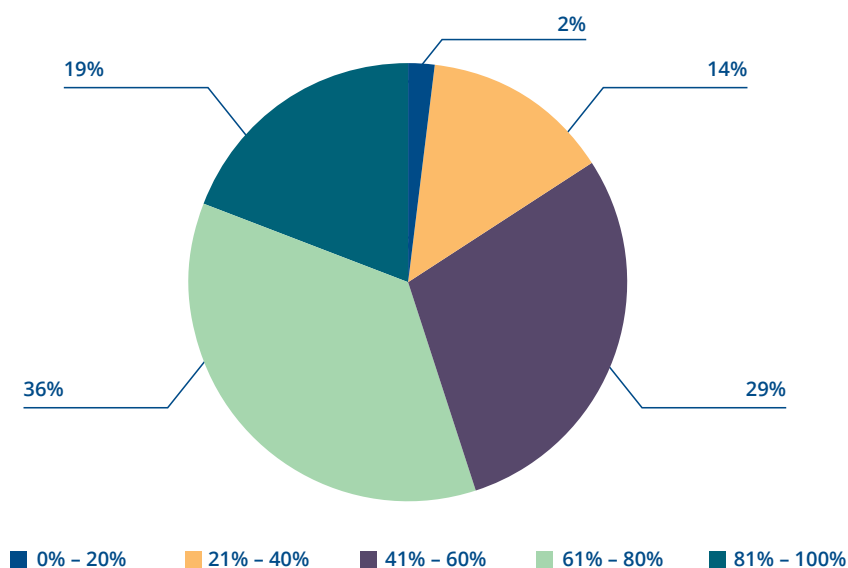


their weekly rent by four, which omits two-three days each month (~10% of the total cost). With this in mind, the results show York's student housing is, on average, £14 per month cheaper than Yorkshire as a whole (£437 compared to ~£451 per month) ([Save the Student's 2019](#)). They also suggest student PRS rents in York are £105 per month cheaper than the national figure (£437 and ~£542 respectively) (ibid.).

# Finances and Rent

In terms of the proportion of income spent on rent, of those surveyed, 55% spend over 60% of their monthly income on rent, whilst 19% of York students spend more than 80% of their income on rent. Interestingly, the national average for the proportion of monthly income spent on rent is 46% (*Office for National Statistics, 2019*). This means **81% of students in York spend a greater proportion of their income on accommodation than the average UK private renter**. While this is not a direct comparison as the ONS figures include non-students, it still suggests rent prices are disproportionate to the student maintenance loan received by York's students.

What % of York students' monthly income is spent on rent?



There were several testimonies complaining about increases in rent prices since they began renting in York.

**“They put the price up by £10 per week, that is £40 per month and nothing new is being done to the house... I have had to cut down how much food I am able to buy... it is quite a struggle, York seems to be getting more expensive to live as a student.”**  
*(Harry, 2nd year)*

**“I joined the University in 2015. After first year, I moved into private accommodation, which was approximately £80 p/w (plus bills were around £10). The following year, that same house is £100 p/w with no additional work done to the house. This is the typical pattern over the past few years, rent prices have increased by a huge percentage.”**  
*(Eleanor, 3rd year)*

It is important to note this evidence is only anecdotal, therefore we cannot conclude with certainty that there is a trend of annual rent increases in York's student submarket. However, these experiences reflect evidence of rent increases in York as a whole. A report by Zoopla (*2020*) found that York had the sixth highest annual rental growth in the UK for 2020. Compared to 2015 (2.8% increase), 2020 has seen rents in York increase by 4.2%.



## Finances and Rent

Survey responses suggest that students access a plethora of income sources to fund their accommodation, while studying. Unsurprisingly, the most common source was a student loan (71%). Second and third most common, was financial support from parents (57%) and part-time jobs (46%). A significant proportion of students also used their savings (40%) and overdraft facilities (23%). Some students (15%) received financial support from the University, 15% had a scholarship, whilst 10% had borrowed money from friends or family. A minority of students (3%) received financial support from a partner, relied on a credit card (2%), had a full-time job (2%), were on benefits (1%), or relied on payday or short-term loans (1%).

These figures show that 57% of York students receive financial support from their parents compared to the national average of 48% ([Save the Student, 2019](#)). This may reflect the costs in York's student PRS being at a point where the majority of students supplement their maintenance loans from other sources. It could also indicate that a greater proportion (compared with students nationally) of York students are supported by families that have the means to support them financially. Regardless, the data suggests that current maintenance loans are insufficient for students living in the York PRS. Students are left with very little after rent payments, making them

vulnerable, particular those from low income families and backgrounds. Only London based students receive a maintenance loan proportionate to the cost of living.

This widespread reliance on supplementary sources of income in York, inevitably means there will be a disproportionate impact on students from low income backgrounds. Students from low income backgrounds may be more reliant on taking up part-time work - potentially a significant number of hours - to supplement their maintenance loan. In a recent study, [Dennis et al \(2018\)](#) found that students engaging in more than ten hours of low skilled term-time employment each week had a significantly lower mean attainment than those not in term-time employment (1.6% lower). Research done by WonkHe also suggests that students undertaking term-time employment are less likely to participate in sport and extracurricular activities, therefore making them more likely to be at risk of loneliness ([Dickinson, 2019](#)).

While there are proportionally fewer York students using overdrafts, pay-day loans or credit cards (24%) than the national figure of 40% ([Save the Student, 2019](#)), this could again speak to the composition of the student body in terms of socioeconomic status. Access rates from the lower POLAR4 (measure of participation in higher



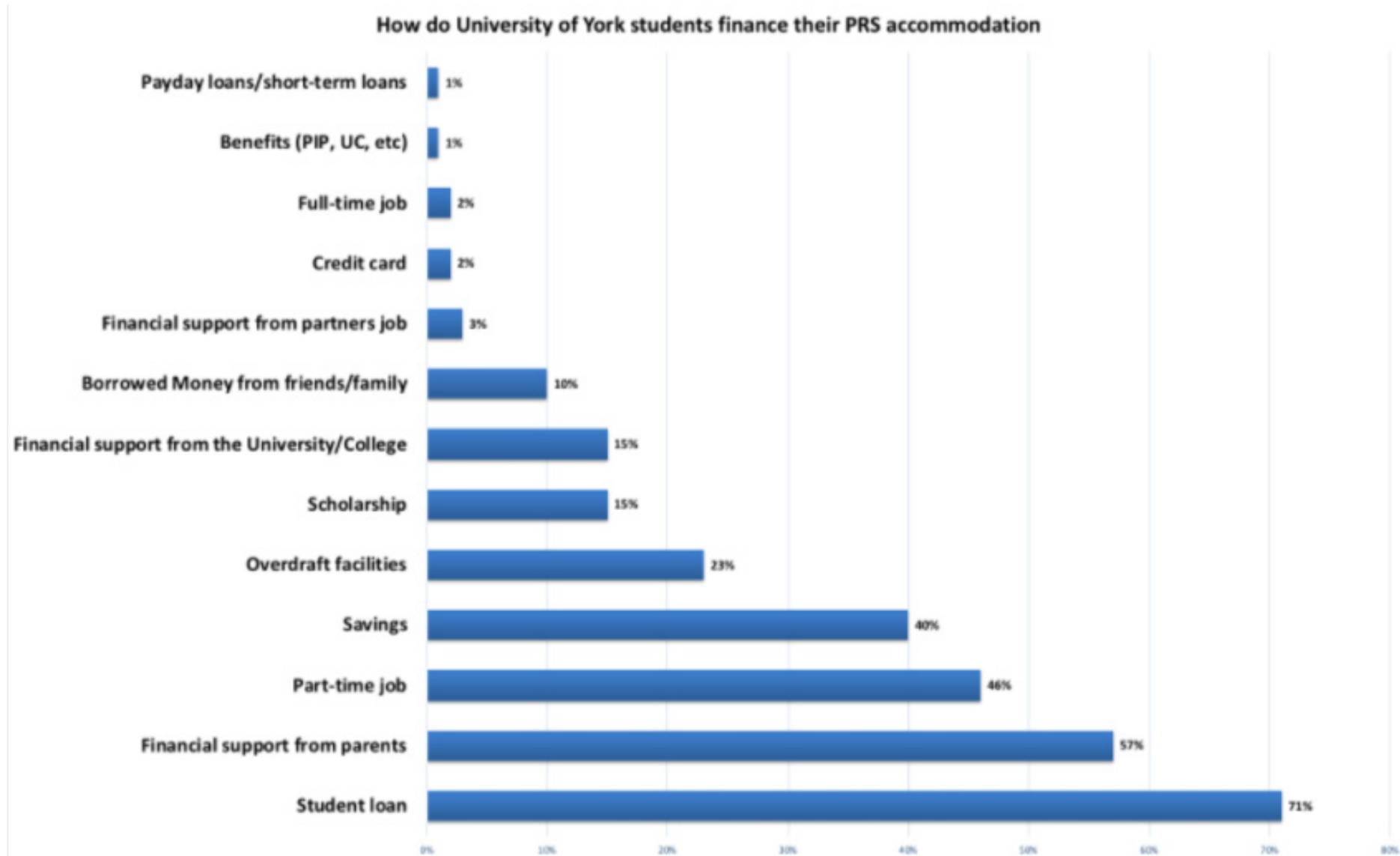
## Finances and Rent

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education by postcode) quintiles require improvement at York. In 2017-2018, the percentage of York students from the lowest two quintiles combined was 20.5% - around 5% below the Sector median (***University of York's Access and Participation Plan: 2020-25***).

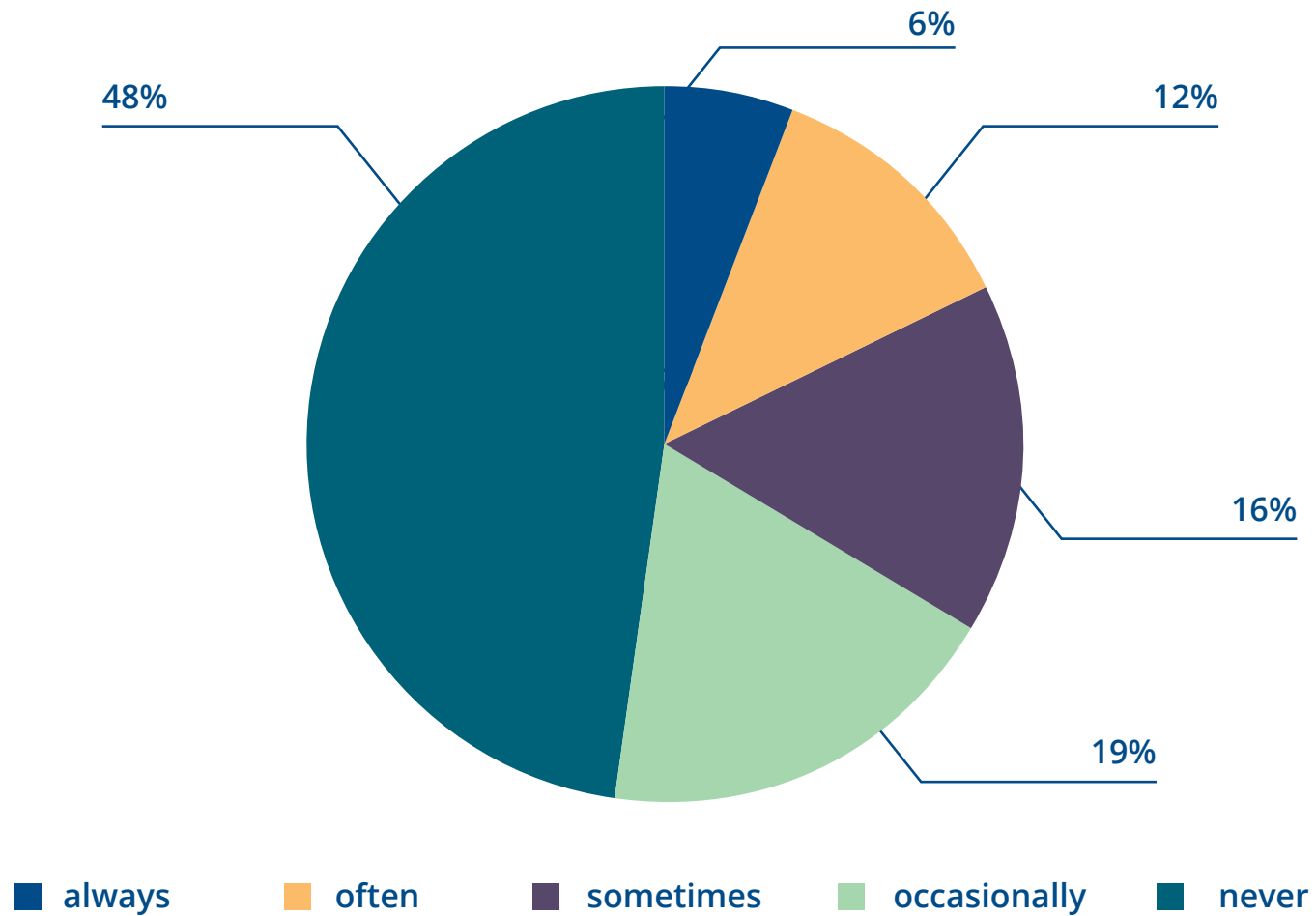
In addition, the results show 6% of students always have difficulties making rent payments; 12% often have difficulties; 16% sometimes have difficulties; 19% occasionally have difficulties; and 48% never have difficulties. This means 52% of York students struggle to make rent payments, at least occasionally, coming in just above the national figure of 50% (***Save the Student, 2019***).

# Finances and Rent



# Finances and Rent

I \_\_\_\_\_ have difficulty making rent payments



## Conditions, Repairs and Abuse

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This section explores issues students have experienced in relation to the quality of property management by the L/LA and the quality of the accommodation. This theme is derived from the three questions: “What issues, if any, have you experienced in private rented accommodation?”, “What issues, if any, have you experienced with your L/LA?”, and “Do you have anything else you wish to add about your experience of being a private student renter in York?”.

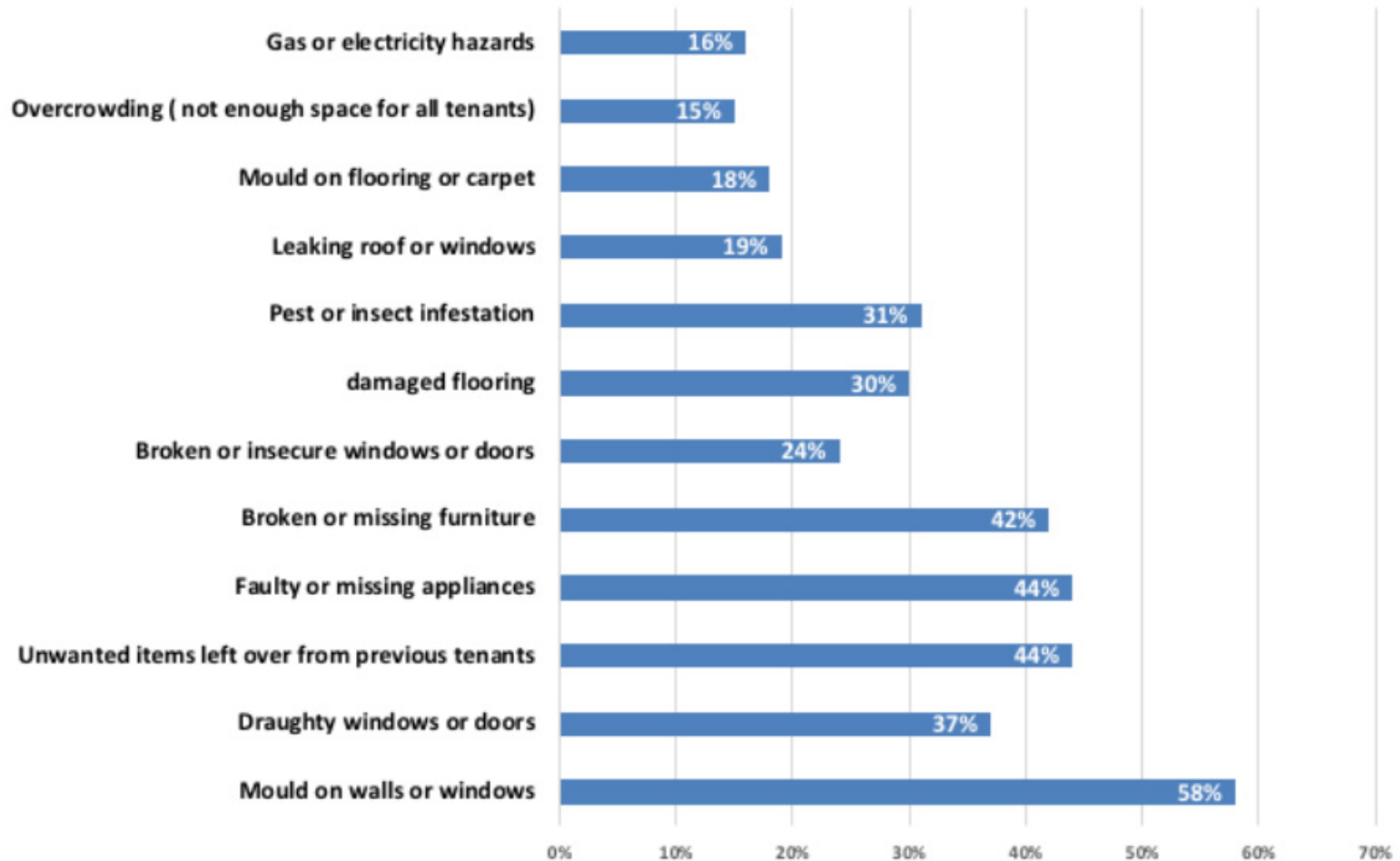
We found that the most common complaint was repairs not being carried out in a reasonable timeframe – raised by 47% of students. Many students also reported potential category 1 hazards (classified using the ‘Housing, Health and Safety Rating System), as set out under the [Housing Act 2004](#). For example, **31% of students reported pest or insect infestations and 16% had experienced gas, electricity, or fire hazards**. Their accommodation was therefore unfit for human habitation and if the repairs were not carried out in a reasonable timeframe, they could have been entitled to seek redress using the [Homes \(Fitness for Human Habitation\) Act 2018](#). This Act gives tenants a way to take action themselves if they rent a property in poor condition and the landlord fails to do the necessary maintenance.

The number of students reporting substandard conditions in their homes was significant. Indicators of ‘non-decency’ identified included: tenant overcrowding (15%), mould on floor or carpet (18%), damaged windows or doors (24%), damaged flooring (30%), draughty windows and doors (37%), missing or damaged furniture (42%), faulty or missing appliances (43%), unwanted items from previous tenants (44%), and mould on walls or windows (58%). These figures do not however tell us whether the L/LA responded to these issues in a timely and appropriate way or what the student expectations were.

The significant proportion of students experiencing category 1 hazards in the York PRS reflects the current challenges faced by the City of York Council in encouraging, supporting and regulating private landlords and agents in providing safe and well managed properties. It is unclear whether the Council has met its objective - as set out in the [York Private Sector Housing Strategy: Action Plan](#) - of reducing the number of category 1 hazards in the York PRS, in particular, in houses of multiple occupation (HMOs), where the majority of private renting students live.

# Conditions, Repairs and Abuse

Proportion of students who have experienced the following issues:

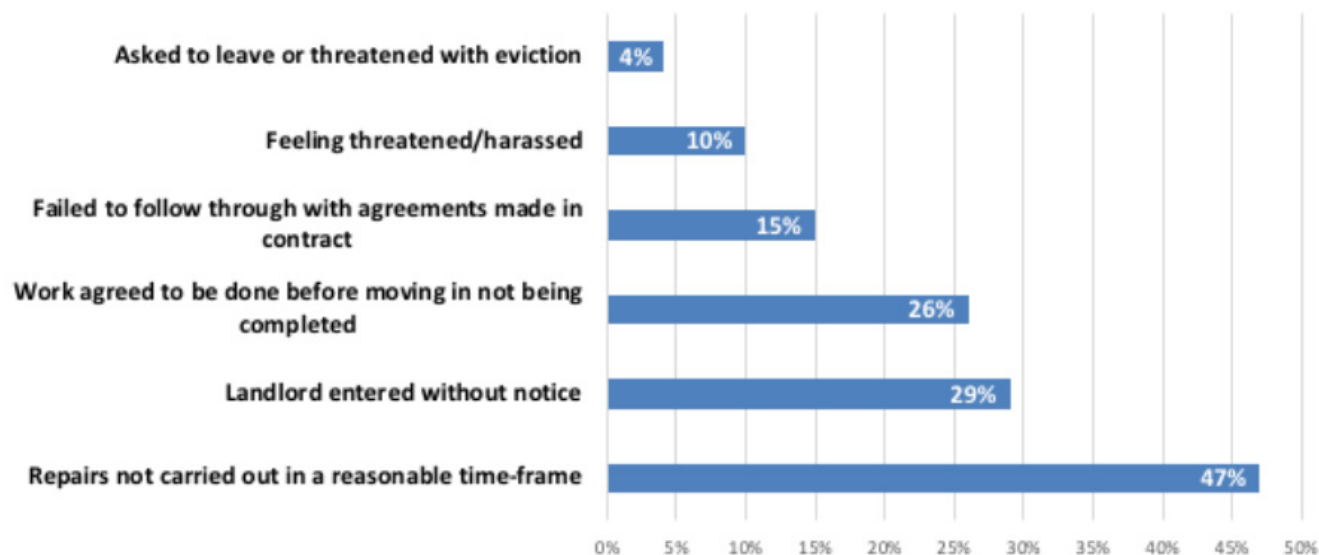


# Conditions, Repairs and Abuse

In addition to the specific hazards reported, issues with the conduct of L/LAs was also noted. Next to the timeliness of repairs (47%), landlords entering students' homes without notice (29%) was another common issue. Many students also identified work not being completed upon moving in (26%); contracts not being followed through (15%); feeling threatened or harassed (10%); and being threatened with eviction or asked to leave (4%).

Our data chimes with the national picture, where according to a recent report by the all-party law and human rights organisation, *Justice (2020: 4)*, in the current expanding rental market, landlords are too often, intentionally or unwittingly, failing to discharge their obligations to make repairs or take other safety measures. Concurrently, renters fear the consequences of enforcing rights and standards in their home. The following testimonies give a voice to these numbers.

**Proportion of students who have experienced the following issues with their landlord or letting agent:**



**“I’ve experienced letting agency managers calling me names and entering the property without any notification. When I expressed concern about it, their response was full hostility. This particular [person] has expressed to me several times that there isn’t anything I can do about this because I won’t have any luck finding a room.”**  
*(Sarah, Postgraduate)*

## Conditions, Repairs and Abuse

**“It is very easy for landlords to take advantage of students with little knowledge about renting. More needs to be done to help protect students from being taken advantage of”**

**“The letting agents are awful. They are disorganised and will try to swindle you and blame you for anything they can. They ignore your emails to say there is something wrong in the house. They treat you with no respect because you are students. They will ALWAYS take part of your deposit for something, but will not fix it. Anything you do is going to be wrong because you are a student, so the landlords and letting agents don’t care and are never going to work with you.”**

*(Bob, 3rd year)*

While these testimonies demonstrate some level of awareness and engagement with tenant rights, namely, reference to requirements not being met by their L/LA. They also suggest a lack of awareness, confidence and willingness to seek redress when there are unresolved problems. This aligns with national literature on low levels of awareness of rights and obligations across the PRS ([Marsh and Gibb 2019](#)). This is illuminated by research from Shelter that found that only 22% of 18-24 year olds had been given a copy of an up-to-date copy of the government publication: ‘How to Rent’, which L/LAs are

legally obliged to provide under the Deregulation Act 2015 (Shelter data seen in [Rugg & Rhodes, 2018: 106-107](#)).

Among other things, the ‘How to Rent’ leaflet summarises landlord and tenant rights and responsibilities and provides information on what to do when there are problems.

Students also alluded to the power imbalances between themselves and L/LAs, which they felt enabled L/LAs to proactively and willingly flout their legal responsibilities. Some students expressed the view that they were treated differently because they were students - leading to L/LAs unfairly withholding deposits, entering the property without the required 24 hours notice and not taking complaints seriously.

On a positive note, the comments were not all negative:

**“Our Landlord has been so lovely! I’ve been in the same house for about 3 years and about to spend my final year at uni here too. The landlord mainly leaves us to get on with life and is very quick to fix or check or update anything that goes faulty.”**

*(Agnes, 3rd year)*

Overall, the survey results suggest that the quality of accommodation and the service provided by L/LA was frequently below what students deemed acceptable

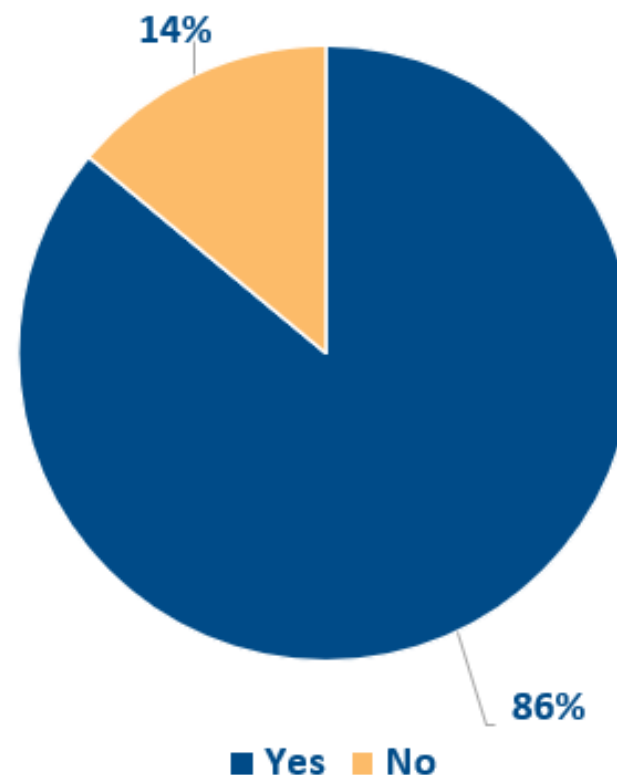
## Conditions, Repairs and Abuse

and the standards laid out in legislation. Notably, the proportion of 'non-decent' student houses in York likely exceeds the national figure given for PRS as a whole, which was 27% in 2017 (*Rugg and Rhodes, 2018*). Issues of non-decency in the York PRS seem linked to students' sense of powerlessness and incomplete understandings of their rights. This was evident from the experiences students shared and the high proportion that are living/ have lived with conditions and management actionable under the *Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2019*. The extent and severity of conditions reported by students also suggests that the Council's engagement in property improvement and enforcement activity is not as effective as it could be.

**Pertinently, 86% of students feel there is pressure to secure a property.** This section discusses the causes of this pressure and the consequences of having to secure a house well in advance of the next academic year.

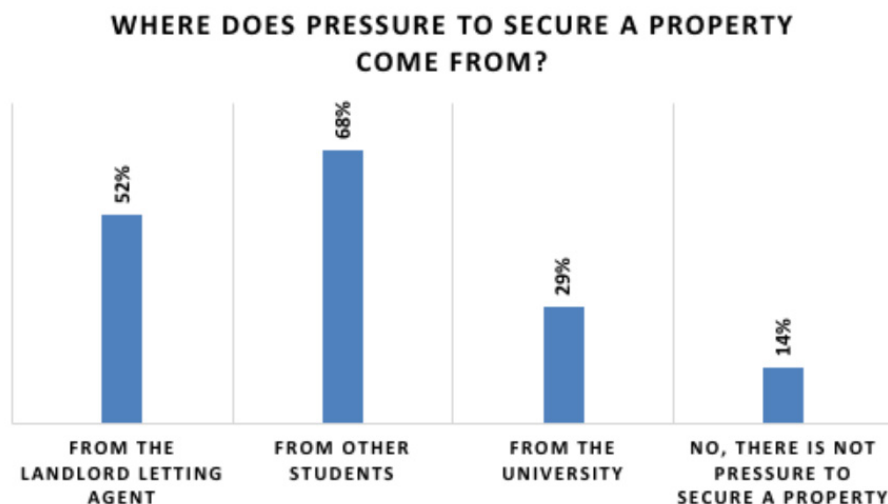
Most notably, 68% of respondents said they felt pressure from other students to secure a house. Over half (52%), said they felt pressure from a landlord or letting agent, whilst 29% said pressure came from the University. A minority of students (14%) said they felt no pressure to secure a property.

Do you feel there is pressure to secure a property?





# Pressure to Secure a Property



One result of this pressure is that students begin looking for accommodation extremely early in the year. At the same time, students have to decide who they are living with because that will determine what size of house to look for. Our survey data illustrates that, excluding students that answered ‘don’t know’, 45% of students began searching for accommodation for the next academic year in October, November or December. A further 21% began their search in January. Therefore, 66% of students began their search during the first third of the academic year. Our qualitative data highlights the consequences this pressure has on students’ experiences of housing in York:

**“Know that you’re prepared to live with the people you’re planning to. I realised I didn’t like [living] with my house mates because...”** (Danny, 2nd year)

**“The biggest problem was choosing people to live with, as having to make the decision early on in the academic year, means once you live together you are no longer friends.”** (Lola, 3rd year)

Comments from student testimonies suggest that high levels of pressure applied internally within student communities are largely driven by fears of not being included in a friend’s house, or rumours of a dwindling supply of accommodation. This ultimately raises stress levels among student groups, which leads to tenants finding themselves locked into contracts with unsuitable housemates.

These problems were raised repeatedly when we asked students for further comments about their experiences of being a private student renter in York.

**“It’s a scramble to get the cheapest housing when it comes to off campus rented accommodation.”** (Patrick, 3rd year)

# Pressure to Secure a Property

**“There’s loads of pressure from students to secure a house early, which felt stressful even in Freshers.”**

*(Sasha, 1st year)*

**“I think the pressure to secure accommodation is one of the main issues as it starts ridiculously early in York. For example, to secure our house for another year we had to re-sign the contract by 1st November bearing in mind that we had only been living with each other and in this house for a month prior to this. This is also an issue for freshers who have only just met all these new people at University and so it is too early to know who you want to live with in a year’s time. Therefore, I think that this should be a priority issue to tackle.”**

*(John, 3rd year)*

These statements indicate York students perceive the demand for student houses in York to outstrip supply. This is most obvious in respect to the cheapest housing. However, the pressure does not only come from other students, but also L/LAs. In one account, a student accused a letting agent of pushing rumours about the so-called ‘scramble’:

**“They are the worst letting agency that I have ever dealt with. They pressure students into competing**

**against other groups and forcing them to jump through all kinds of hoops. Renting shouldn’t be a difficult or unpleasant experience - just because we are students and inexperienced, there is no reason for them to treat us like a number and to be rude.”**

*(Hamish, 3rd year)*

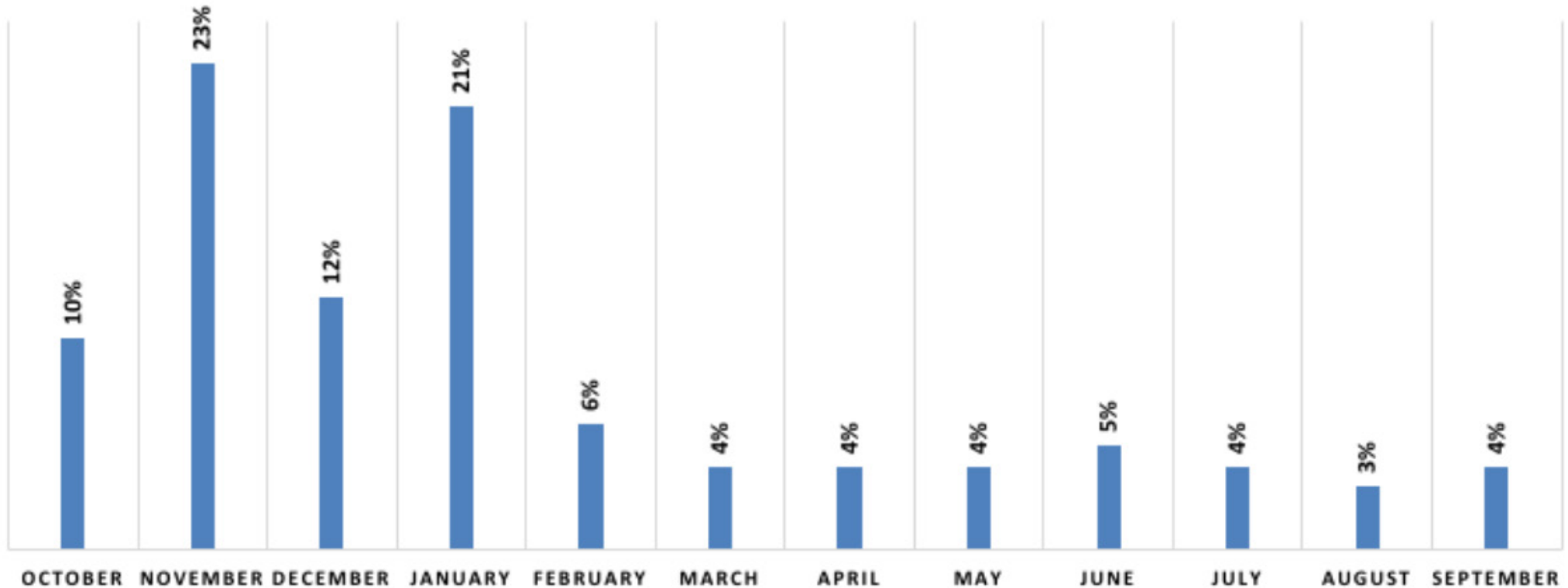
Pressure from L/LAs feeds into student perceptions about demand and compounds pressures to sign quickly for any available house, rather than thinking carefully about the decision. The results indicate students are convinced that beginning the housing search too late would negatively impact their experience.

**“Finding accommodation was really hard because I received my offer to study quite late into the year. As such, I had to settle for the only accommodation I could find in my budget at the time.”**

*(Ella, postgraduate)*

# Pressure to Secure a Property

IN WHAT MONTH DID STUDENTS START SEARCHING FOR PRIVATE ACCOMMODATION?



# Pressure to Secure a Property

**“The quality of your house really does depend on whether you manage to sign something before Christmas. This is quite ridiculous since there shouldn’t be such a dearth in houses available 6 months before you move in! In many other UK cities I know of people who can find really great accommodation within a couple of months of moving in, whereas in York it’s absolutely slim pickings if you’re not 100% on the ball”** *(Sam, 3rd year)*

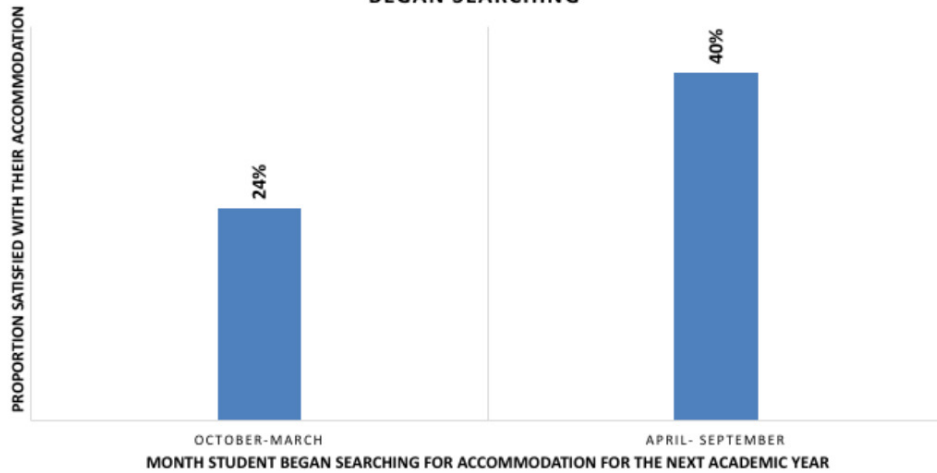
The pressure to secure a house early is therefore a culmination of market and social drivers: a lack of supply relative to demand, and the resultant scaremongering and peer pressure this creates. However, contrary to the dominant narrative that there is a ‘scramble’ for the best accommodation; our analysis suggests that students who begin searching for accommodation later in the academic year are more likely to be satisfied with accommodation in York.

When the year is split into two halves, satisfaction levels increase from **24% of all students (October - March) to 40% of all students (April - September)**. The same pattern is found when splitting the year into thirds (**25%, 33%, 37%**). Similarly, when the year is split into quarters, there is a stark difference between the first and second

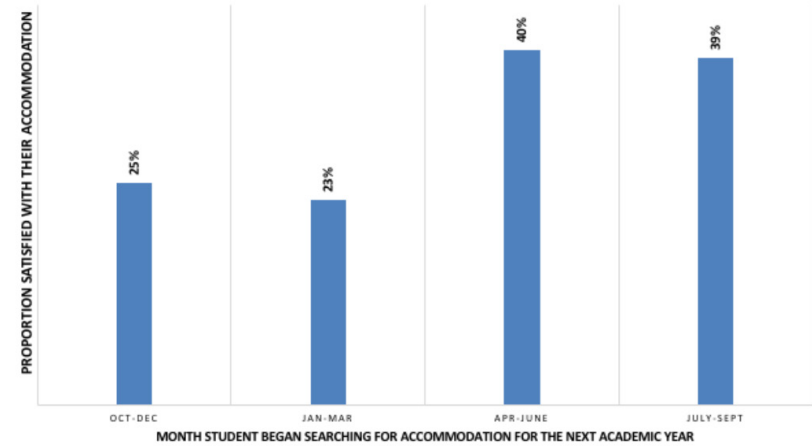
quarters (**25%, 23%**) and the third and fourth quarters (**40%, 39%**). This suggests that the current culture of searching and signing for PRS accommodation in the first half of the academic year is having a negative impact on satisfaction levels. Note we have chosen not to display a month by month analysis due to the low sample sizes of later months.

# Pressure to Secure a Property

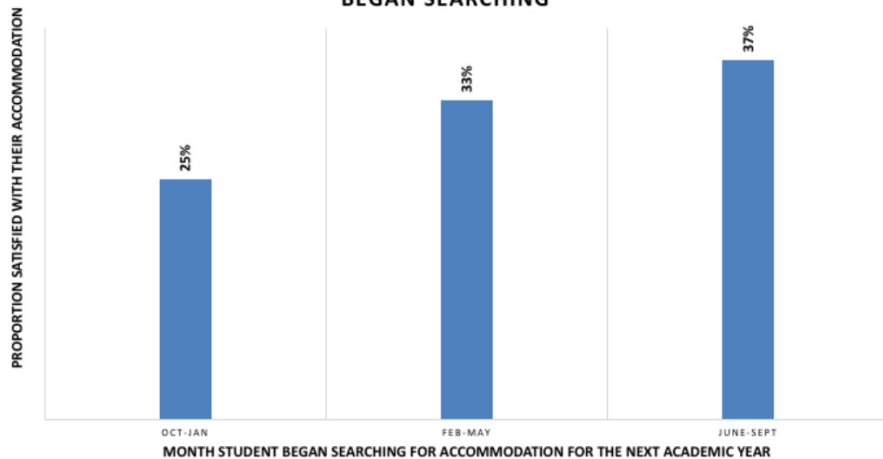
PROPORTION OF STUDENTS SATISFIED WITH THEIR ACCOMMODATION BASED ON WHICH HALF OF THE YEAR THEY BEGAN SEARCHING



PROPORTION OF STUDENTS SATISFIED WITH THEIR ACCOMMODATION BASED ON QUARTER THEY BEGAN SEARCHING



PROPORTION OF STUDENTS SATISFIED WITH THEIR ACCOMMODATION BASED ON WHICH THIRD OF THE YEAR THEY BEGAN SEARCHING



# International student experience

International students experience uniquely troublesome issues in the PRS, such as the requirement for UK based guarantors, property viewings, and payments of several months rent upfront. In the York context, where 62% of international students (Garland, 2020) are from Asia, language barriers make them particularly vulnerable. These vulnerabilities can be amplified where there are issues with their property or landlord.

International students struggle to find L/LAs who are willing to rent to them without a UK based guarantor (someone who is legally responsible for rent payments if the tenants falls into arrears). This has helped grow an entire industry of rent guarantor companies.

**“As an international who does not have a UK guarantor finding a property that doesn’t require year upfront payment is near impossible”**

*(Nathan, 3rd year)*

Not only does this reduce the number of properties available to international students in what is already a competitive market, but it forces students to pay large sums of money upfront. It is not inconceivable that this could lead to neglect from L/LAs towards tenants who have paid months in advance (though there is no explicit evidence of this happening in York). One respondent found securing a property so difficult they had to live

outside of York at the beginning of their studies, which resulted in that student’s mental health declining:

**“International students should be provided with help in securing a place in York. All the places in York required me to view the place in person before arriving in the UK and therefore, I had to rent a place in [location removed to ensure anonymity] for a few weeks. I had to get up very early in the morning to catch the train for my morning classes... This was a very depressing start for me and made me mentally depressed.”**

*(Charlotte, 1st year)*

International students also find it difficult to secure suitable property because many L/LAs require visits in person prior to signing a contract. In combination with the other requirements, this has led to discriminatory practice against international students.

**“Landlords don’t trust someone they have never seen to rent their property. That is why I ended up looking for accommodation as soon as I arrived in the UK but it was too late.”**

*(Darren, Postgraduate)*

# International student experience

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**“It’s very expensive for what you get and there are many obstacles and requirements especially for international students, and that ends up being discriminatory”**

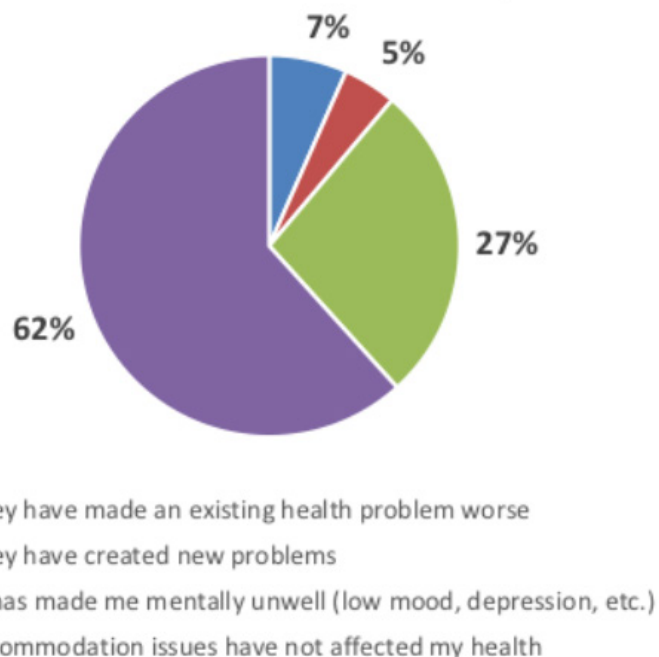
*(Paula, 2nd year)*

These statements outline the serious challenges for international students in the PRS. Moreover, these issues are not unique to York and reflect a wider national problem. In York, the consequences are clear. We found **international students are almost twice as likely to spend £500 or more per month on rent compared to domestic students (18% and 34%)**. In addition, the common assumption that all international students can afford higher prices is problematic: **47% of international students said they struggle to pay rent (at least occasionally) compared to 51% of domestic students**. This suggests many international students have just as much financial difficulty in terms of rent cost as domestic students, likely compounded by higher tuition fees for non-EU students.

# Health

The survey data suggests that as well as being financially and socially challenging, experiences in the York PRS can also be damaging to health. Of those surveyed, **39% of University of York students say accommodation issues have contributed to poor health in general, whilst 27% said accommodation issues have made them mentally unwell.**

**Have accommodation issues contributed to poor health?**



**A third of students who struggle to make rent payments (at least occasionally) reported being mentally unwell due to accommodation issues. For students who never struggle to make payments, only a fifth experienced being mentally unwell due to accommodation.**

Moreover, given 86% of students felt there was pressure to secure a student property, we analysed the association of feeling pressure with mental health problems caused by accommodation. **Students who felt there was pressure to secure a property were almost twice as likely to report accommodation issues had impacted their mental health, compared to those who did not feel pressure (29% vs 16%).** Efforts to reduce the pressure placed on students in the PRS are therefore paramount to improving experiences.

Another notable factor linked to mental ill-health was being threatened or harassed by their L/LA. **Students who reported being threatened or harassed by their L/LA were more than twice as likely to report mental health problems as a result of accommodation issues (55% vs 24%).**



# Health

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Our findings support a range of literature on the link between housing problems and mental ill-health. Green & McCarthy ([2015](#), also see [Barrett et al, 2012](#)) associate poor quality housing and the behaviour of tenants in shared accommodation with stress, anxiety and insecurity. Shaw et al ([1998](#)) highlighted the relationship between houses of multiple occupation (HMOs) and poor mental health. Finally, [Shelter \(2017\)](#) found that one in five English adults said a housing issue had negatively impacted upon their mental health. The link between mental ill-health and housing problems is clearly well established, it seems important for the University of York, indeed all universities, to take a more proactive role in supporting students in the PRS and taking strategic measures to influence quality. Clearly mental ill-health can have serious impacts on academic performance and student experiences, as such, universities have a duty of care to do all they can to address causal and exacerbating factors, such as poor housing.

These findings indicate that the mental health of University of York students is being negatively impacted by certain factors associated with living in the PRS: disrepair; struggling to pay rent; pressure to secure a house; and threatening behaviour from L/LAs.

## What next?

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In this section, we explore what students think would improve their experiences in the PRS; what the University of York currently does to support students in the PRS; and some potential interventions to enhance property quality and management.

### What do students want?

We asked York students what would contribute to making their accommodation search and renting experience better? The most frequent response was better minimum legal standards in relation to property conditions (69%). Second in frequency of mentions was an online rating system for L/LA (67%), closely followed by more legal advice for helping to challenge bad L/LA practice (61%). More pressure from local politicians (59%) was also popular with students.

Moreover, just over half of students wanted more advice from the student union (53%), whilst close to fifty percent pointed to a landlord accreditation scheme (49%) as a way of improving experiences for students in the PRS. Pressure from national politicians (44%) and support from a tenants' union (38%) were next in popularity, with the least cited interventions being more government advice to tenants (29%) and more advice from independent organisations, such as Citizens Advice (21%).

Information overload is a common issue in the higher education sector (survey fatigue etc). Students at the University of York receive an abundance of information from their departments, their Colleges and their students' union about opportunities and where they can get support and advice. As such, it was interesting to see such a significant proportion of students say they want more legal advice. Our data suggests there is a gap in legal advice for students in relation to housing, particularly in the PRS. This could represent an opportunity for the University of York's Law Clinic and/or a third sector provider to develop an offer for students above and beyond what already exists in York.

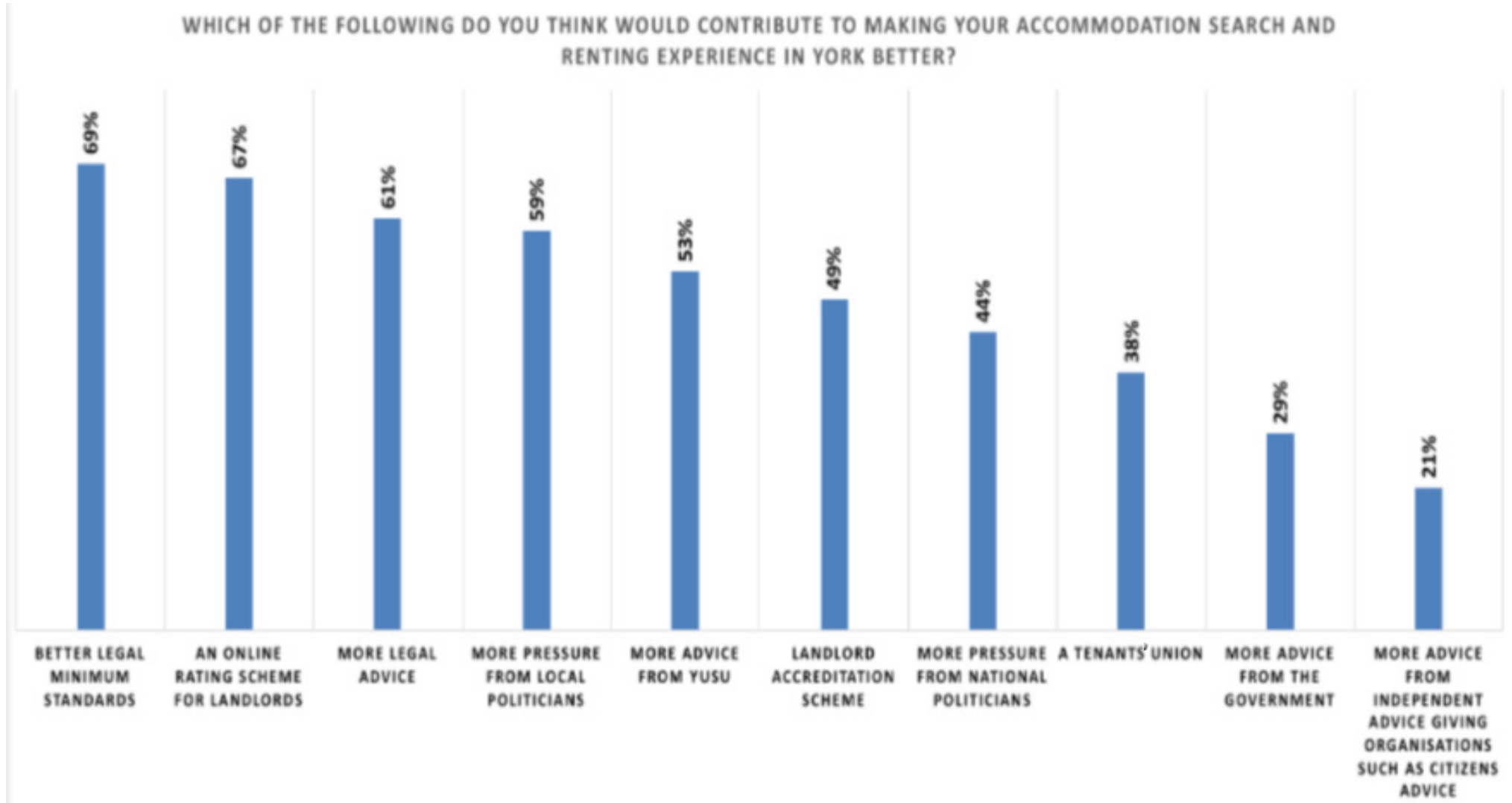
A collaborative Citizens Advice, YUSU and University information campaign would be also invaluable to raise awareness of tenant rights and enhance access to justice via legal avenues available to them. It will also be vital for any collaborative approach to involve the City of York Council and to highlight the need for greater emphasis on early resolution, conciliatory measures and ways to navigate the dispute resolution system ([Justice, 2020](#)).

## What next?

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Given the difficulties experienced by students in the PRS in York, it is unsurprising that a high proportion of those surveyed gravitated towards regulatory and robust consumerist interventions as ways of improving the PRS for students. Enhanced minimum legal standards and online rating schemes are intended to hold L/LAs accountable for bad practice and control the quality of properties more effectively. Such schemes aim to improve the market itself. If this could be achieved, the 'scramble', less a 'blind scramble' for quality accommodation in York, would no longer be an inevitability for students. This could go a long way to improving student experiences in the PRS, including health and wellbeing.

# What next?



# University of York Provision

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For students living in the PRS, the University of York provides advice and information through the following channels:

1. **[York Law School Clinic](#)**

2. Advice and casework support at **[The Student Hub](#)**

## Law Clinic

However, as the primary focus of the Clinic is providing York Law students with a practice-based educational opportunity, the capacity is small. In 2018-2019, the Law Clinic provided advice on 24 cases, 3 of which related to private tenancies. The Clinic is resourced to cover the elective module and only takes cases from October to March. There is an appetite for the Clinic to do more and to diversify its activities, particularly in relation to private rented sector housing. However, the Law Clinic should not be seen as a panacea in terms of increasing the provision of legal advice for York students living in the PRS.

A significant proportion of the students surveyed identified that more legal advice to challenge bad landlord practices would contribute to improving their experience of the PRS. The University of York, YUSU and Citizens Advice York must work collaboratively to explore what can be done to better enable students to challenge bad

landlord practices, both in terms of legal advice and rights-based education. However, the York Law Clinic may well need additional funding - from the University of York and external funders - if it is to take on additional housing-related services and projects. Positively, York Law School is keen to explore a range of options and we discussed potential interventions as part of the development of this report:

1. **Students as advocates** - e.g. in First Tier Tribunals - as they are at the King's College London Law Clinic.
2. **Street Law/Legal information sessions** - the Clinic is exploring whether students - those on the module and other law students - could deliver information sessions in the community and produce content on certain aspects of law. This work is about empowering citizens to understand their rights and is lower risk and less intensive than legal advice and casework. We could explore with the Law School how this approach could be used to communicate information about housing rights, what to do when there are problems etc.
3. **Contract checking** - The Law Clinic is already exploring the possibility of law students checking housing contracts for their peers. An interesting consideration could be how to facilitate this activity online - e.g. in the form of an app or an online learning tool.

# University of York Provision

**4. Clock Project** (a collaboration with York St John University) - The Clinic is already running a small project with second and third year students, who are assisting litigants in person at the County Court in York. The students are currently working with citizens going through family law processes, but the project could be extended to housing law cases. This work is not advocacy or advice-based, it is about providing emotional support to litigants in person; helping them understand papers; and signposting them to other services.

**“Personally our landlord abused her power and left us feeling scared and anxious in our home. As first-time renters we were not aware of our rights. This seriously affected our mental health and we didn’t know where to look for support.”**

**“I had a lack of legal knowledge and support when my landlord demanded extra money on top of refusing to return the house’s deposits. Threatened (unfairly) with legal action led us to avoid problems/ stress and we decided to pay.”**

**“Get rid of [X] and their monopoly on the market please. They are the worst letting agency that I have ever dealt with. They pressure students into competing against other groups and forcing them to jump through all kinds of hoops. Renting shouldn’t be a difficult or unpleasant experience - just because we are students and inexperienced, there is no reason for them to treat us like a number and to be rude. Also, landlords just wander into the property - regardless of us complaining that they need to give notice. They keep ‘finding’ new evidence and use it to threaten that they will evict us . There is no record of how the house was before (apart from the photos we took moving in showing the house to be a mess) that suggest it was ever a clean house. A legal support clinic would be very useful to defend ourselves - maybe some good practice for law students?”**

*(Ahmed, 3rd year)*

# University of York Provision

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## Student Hub

As well as the Law Clinic, the University of York also provides advice and support through the Student Hub. Advisers at the Hub provide general guidance and specialist support with enquiries relating to housing, finance and money, immigration and student records. Moreover, in very exceptional circumstances, the University's Student Hub also administers and distributes emergency loans and bursaries through the 'Student Support Fund'. This is designed for students experiencing urgent financial hardship - e.g. rent arrears.

Between September 2019 and the start of March 2020, the Student Hub dealt with 203 student housing enquiries. Of those enquiries, 46% related to finding accommodation; 36% related to disputes with landlords; and 12% related to issues around disrepair. The remaining enquiries were a mix of other housing issues including University accommodation and housemate disputes. To support students experiencing problems in the PRS, advisers at the Student Hub employ a mix of information provision, signposting to statutory bodies such as the Council and advocacy. Their advocacy role can involve speaking to landlords and agents on the behalf of students and contacting the Council's private rented sector team. However, they are unable to provide legal

advice and support and often signpost students to Shelter's template letters in more serious cases.

Advisers at the Hub also report that there are very few solicitors or organisations that offer legal housing advice in York. This reflects the picture across the country, where access to legal advice to address housing problems has been greatly reduced by the cuts to civil legal aid introduced by the **Legal Aid Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPO)**. According to the report by **Justice (2020: 6)**, funding cuts have caused large parts of the housing advice sector to collapse, resulting in "advice deserts" across huge swathes of the country and leaving many with nowhere to go when facing a housing problem. Whilst students in York have access to on-campus advice via the Student Hub, the legal advice gap in York - coupled with a lack of confidence and knowledge around renter rights - might go some way to explaining why so few students engage with the legal process when they have housing problems.



# Accreditation Schemes and Consumer-based Solutions

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## Voluntary Accreditation

Landlord accreditation schemes are non-statutory frameworks designed to increase levels of professionalism and compliance in the PRS, through disincentives and incentives. Accreditation schemes give renters a simple way to evaluate potential landlords and if effective, engender confidence that they are signing with a high quality landlord. Accreditation is defined in a variety of ways, but tends to include a system which 'badges' a landlord who has, or is actively training towards a level of practice deemed acceptable by the accreditation authority and which might include, for example, a commitment to abide by a code of conduct devised by that authority ([Rugg and Rhodes, 2018: 114](#)). These schemes have the potential to improve market functioning by giving credence to responsible landlords and increasing access to information for consumers.

Schemes tend to be voluntary, run by a University associated organisation or the local authority. Their effectiveness generally depends on the package of incentives they provide to landlords in return for their commitment. These can include access to relevant databases, a quality mark, discounts to services, marketing through an accredited landlords website and continuous professional development.

[Halton Borough Council](#) is a good local authority example of some of the incentives that can be used to encourage landlords' participation.

Schemes have been successfully implemented in several local authorities and within the student PRS context.

[Manchester Student Homes](#) is the only University approved accreditation scheme in Manchester. Prospective accredited landlords must sign up to the code of practice and pay a fee based on the number of properties they want accredited. In return, they have their properties advertised on the website where students know all landlords have agreed to certain standards.

Sheffield's [SNUG scheme](#) is an excellent example of a partnership approach to the monitoring and regulation of student housing in the PRS. The SNUG property registration scheme is a partnership between Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield Hallam Students' Union and Sheffield Council. The Scheme is also promoted by the University of Sheffield and its student union. The scheme commits the Council, strategically, to ensuring that Sheffield can offer good quality and safe accommodation for students. Landlords pay a small fee to agree to meet SNUG's high [property standards](#) and management code.

Although the market landscape is completely different in Sheffield (e.g. there are more students in the PRS,



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# Accreditation Schemes and Consumer-based Solutions

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there is an oversupply of properties and there are no Colleges), the SNUG and Manchester Student Homes models demonstrate the potential of a city-wide approach to student housing, where the two universities, student unions and Council come together to incentivise good quality and management. Offering accreditation to L/LAs in York is an opportunity to tackle many of the issues raised in this report. Accreditation schemes are most effective when they sit on top of landlord licencing regimes (which ensure compliance with certain minimum safety standards) and incentivise landlords to improve the quality and management of their properties.

Such a scheme in York, could add real value by encouraging landlords and agents to place properties on the market during February at the earliest (second third of the academic year). This could even be a condition of membership, which would partially address the 'scramble' for housing that contributes to lower levels of satisfaction. The scheme could also require accredited L/LAs to consider the needs of international students by no longer requiring viewings, multiple months rent upfront, or UK based guarantors. These additional regulatory conditions could focus specifically on the needs of students.

An effective accreditation scheme in York, with the Universities playing a leading role in partnership with the

Council and student unions, would also enable university managers to monitor provision in the PRS. At present, it is unclear how much the University of York (other than specialist advice case workers) actually knows about the PRS, or what problems students are experiencing. An accreditation scheme could act as a way for the University of York to better understand where students are living (balance between PBSA and PRS), how many landlords there are, who the key players are, and where the problems are most frequent.

Without more strategic and proactive interventions to support those who live off-campus, the University is abdicating responsibility to its students. Accreditation is a key part of a package of interventions the University should explore as part of a joined-up city wide approach to accommodation.

## **Consumer Empowerment: Review and Rating Approaches**

The implementation of a consumer-based solution in York's PRS was the second most popular suggestion, in terms of improving experiences, among University of York students.

There could be significant value in exploring whether combining a voluntary accreditation approach with a

# Accreditation Schemes and Consumer-based Solutions

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tenant review platform or a landlord rating scheme could drive positive change in the York student-submarket. At present, there is a dearth of research on the efficacy of consumer mechanisms in improving quality and practice in the PRS. For example, in the York context, it is important to explore whether there is enough room in the market for students to shop around? Do rating platforms work where demand outstrips supply? Don't those with poor ratings just get taken later in the cycle? More broadly, do consumer mechanisms translate well to the housing market? Can they be as effective as they are in the hotel or restaurant industries, for example? Does it promote constructive dialogue between landlords and tenants? Piloting such a scheme, tied to a new accreditation infrastructure in York, would be an opportunity to explore many of these questions.

Notwithstanding some of these challenges, do consumer mechanisms that enable student renters to leave reviews and share feedback with their landlords and other renters - represent potential sources of empowerment for students in the PRS? Tenant satisfaction and dissatisfaction - their lived experiences - cannot be measured or amplified simply through the existence of 'objective' benchmarks in accreditation codes or through the baseline requirements of licensing. Tenants have very individual and subjective experiences of PRS tenancies

and there may be benefits, for themselves and future tenants, in having a platform on which they can express their perspectives on houses and areas they lived in. This may be particularly important for tenants in which the L/ LA has behaved below the tenants' expected standards. Such a platform may act as a form of accountability, which captures often complex expectations, behaviours, and actions that occur in landlord-tenant relationships.

# Conclusion

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This report aimed to understand students' diverse lived experiences in the private rented sector in York. Based on a survey of University of York students, we have unpacked key experiences in relation to cost, quality, the impact of housing experiences on health and the pressure of securing a house. We also covered the experiences of international students, specifically, and suggested a range of recommendations for improving the experiences of students in the York PRS.

Whilst we came across a number of positive stories from students living in the PRS - mainly involving constructive relationships with landlords - the report suggests significant levels of dissatisfaction (42% of students). We appreciate there is great diversity within the student submarket (students' and landlords' characteristics, types of tenures, practices and experiences), so these conclusions are not intended to be taken as a homogenisation of the PRS in York. Moreover, it's important to note that students self-selected for this research, so it was likely to uncover a high proportion of issues within the PRS. However, this report does indicate that student experiences and conditions within the PRS should be a cause for concern for the University of York, landlords and agents, City of York Council and students.

It is well documented that the proportion of homes meeting the 'Decent Homes Standard' is lower in the PRS compared with other principle tenures (Rugg and Rhodes, 2018). Our review has indicated that substandard quality and the presence of hazards such as pest infestations, mould and damaged flooring are commonplace in the York student submarket. Poor property management was also commonly identified by students, particularly repairs not being carried out in a reasonable timeframe (raised by 47% of respondents). The CYC has set an objective of reducing the number of category 1 hazards in the York PRS, however our data suggests that the percentage of student houses with multiple hazards (non-decent) forms a significant part of this challenge.

Our data speaks to the need for a combined effort by the sector in York - CYC, landlords, agents, universities and student renters - to proactively address the issue of landlords intentionally or unwittingly failing to discharge their obligations to make repairs or take other safety measures. Presently, poor property management and quality in the York PRS is having long-term health impacts on students - particularly in relation to mental illness. It may therefore not be advisable to continue to rely on the contract relationship, CYC's current licencing regime and the University of York's hands off approach. A more

# Conclusion

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robust and interventionist strategy is likely required to improve student experiences in the PRS; incorporating 'incentive' and 'disincentive' approaches such as a revitalised accreditation scheme and a student-focused consumer platform; additional property licencing; education for renters and landlords around rights and responsibilities; and better access to legal advice provision when there are issues.

At the time of writing, the University of York is becoming more active in relation to the York PRS, for example: engaging with the preliminary findings and recommendations from this report and speaking to CYC, York St John and YUSU about the prospect of partnership interventions to improve quality and experiences.

While this is very welcome, nonetheless, much more can be done by the University of York to understand student experiences in the PRS and support those who are having issues with their landlords. Whilst there is already excellent housing advice provision at the University of York, there is a gap in legal advice. Indeed students identified this as a gap and many expressed their view that access to legal advice would improve experiences in the PRS. Given the issues with disrepair and hazards identified in this report, it seems important to consider the role of the University of York - in partnership with CYC and the advice sector - in improving

students' access to justice in the context of private housing.

The student experiences we have identified also suggest that the barriers faced by international students is a key issue. International students face many barriers in navigating the PRS, including onerous paperwork, high deposits and other fees, the expectation to view property in person, and often the requirement to provide a UK based guarantor. These barriers can lead to disproportionately negative experiences, which the University of York, landlords and agents must do all they can to mitigate.

In the period since the research was undertaken the University has developed its approach for international students with the YourGuarantor partnership to provide a UK based rent guarantor service. The scheme is providing an important part of these mitigations. It will be important to consider the impact of this on international students' experiences going forward.

Finally, a key issue for students in York is the pressure felt by students to secure a property as early as possible in the academic year. This pressure appears to be caused by early marketing by landlords and agents, but also by students themselves. The consequences of this early 'scramble' for property are often negative - e.g. students agreeing to move into properties with people they don't

# Conclusion

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know and students not scrutinising contracts and the quality of a property. Our research found an association between students who search for property later in the year and higher levels of satisfaction. A concerted and joint effort is needed to incentivise landlords to market their properties later in the academic year. The focus should be firmly placed on quality and encouraging students to consider all their options.

It is in everyone's interests - students, the City, landlords, the universities - for this report to be translated into change. The key recommendation is for the development of a joint strategic approach to improving student experiences in the York PRS, through more robust and effective regulation and access to legal advice. If the following recommendations are enacted in full, CAY and YUSU believe the quality of housing, service provided by L/LAs, and mental health of students in the York PRS, will improve.

# Recommendations

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The following recommendations have been developed following a series of consultations with stakeholders including housing law experts from York Law School, colleagues from York Law Clinic, University of York's Student Hub and other housing researchers.

## Overarching recommendation

**1. A strategic city wide approach** - It is hoped that this work will form part of a wider policy-change approach. We would encourage the Universities (the University of York and York St John) and their students' unions to work with the City of York Council to develop a collaborative student accommodation strategy, which could prioritise: data on the students living in the PRS, enforcement and planning approaches, exploring the scope for an accreditation scheme, community cohesion, the experiences of international students specifically, and supporting students to amplify their voices and exercise their rights in the PRS.

## Council-focused recommendations

**1. A strengthened licensing regime** - We recommend that the City of York Council introduces an additional licensing scheme. Such a scheme would help address both conditions, ensuring that more students and residents in York are housed in properties that we know

are meeting basic health and safety standards, as well as addressing poor housing management. We welcome the proposals that the Council has developed in this area to adopt additional licensing for targeted wards. This would facilitate a more proactive approach to enforcement and more effective and robust management of the PRS overall.

**2. Information for students** - We recommend the City of York Council make information available online, specifically for students. This should include details of the Article 4 planning direction in York for HMOs, which ensures minimum space standards. Details should also be included on the standard licensing conditions imposed. Information should be provided on the enforcement process followed by the Council, and how students can report issues and non-compliance with the above standards.

## University-focused recommendations

**1. Support students to understand and enforce their rights**

**1.1 Additional funding for legal advice** - We recommend that the University provides or helps source additional funding to enable students requiring legal advice to get the support that they need. This could be



# Recommendations

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in collaboration with Citizens' Advice York (CAY), given significant numbers of student referrals to the service, and/ or via the recruitment of a housing law specialist for the York Law Clinic. This specialist could undertake a practice-based action research project within the Clinic, providing much needed legal advice to students experiencing problems in the PRS and collating and analysing data on student housing issues, simultaneously. There would be value in this project being a collaboration between York Law School, YUSU and CAY. That way, these organisations could share access to anonymised data and be better placed to influence policy and practice in the PRS. Once piloted, there may be scope to explore a regional approach, where higher education institutions in the North East, for example, pool funding, share data and practice and work together on evidence-based influencing.

**1.2 Rights-based campaign** - We recommend the development of a systematic education campaign to inform students about their housing rights and where they can access support. Again, there would be value in this being delivered collaboratively by YUSU, the University of York and City of York Council (CYC). Knowledge of rights and responsibilities are key ingredients to ensuring that standards are upheld in the PRS.

**2. Provision of digital support with contract checking** - We recommend the establishment of an online service, supported by York Law School (YLS) and the York Law Clinic, to provide support at each stage of the tenancy process: contract checking, resolving disputes, disrepair issues, and deposit return. To support this work, we also recommend that YLS sources funding for an **internship project** - where students can work in partnership with staff to explore the creation of a multipurpose housing app (contract info, rights and law-based information, how and where to seek redress, signposting to agencies etc). Students on the Law and Computer Science module would be particularly well placed to take this work on.

## Student-focussed recommendations

**1. Don't rent yet!** We recommend that students should start searching for PRS accommodation in February at the very earliest. This is because students are most likely to be satisfied with accommodation if it is secured just a few months before moving in.

**2. Understand their rights** - We recommend that students should learn their rights as tenants, and seek out advice from groups such as York Law Clinic and Citizen's Advice York. Particularly when serious repairs have not been carried out in a reasonable timeframe and when deposits have been unfairly retained.

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# Resources

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[2006 No. 372 HOUSING, ENGLAND The Management of Houses in Multiple Occupation \(England\) Regulations 2006](#)

[Bursaries and scholarships](#)

[Halton Borough Council Landlord Accreditation Scheme Incentives \(proposed\)](#)

[Houses in Multiple Occupation and residential property licensing reform](#)

[Manchester Student Homes](#)

[Sheffield Accreditation Scheme \(Snug\)](#)

[Shelter Landlord Accreditation Good Practice Guide](#)

[Signing a contract and moving in](#)

[Student Support Funding](#)

[University of York student statistics](#)

[York Law School Clinic](#)

