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| Key Theme Report | |
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| Homes Fit for Study  Policy Development Convention, 5-6 December 2013 |

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| Rationale and Context |

**Introduction**

Having a decent home as a base from which to study is becoming increasingly challenging for students, as it is for others in society given the backdrop of a severe housing shortage. With Article 4 Directions having reduced the supply of shared rented housing in England, and welfare reform and an absence of investment in social housing placing additional pressure on the private rented sector across the UK, being able to find a home to rent is proving increasingly difficult in many towns and cities. And once a suitable house is found, letting agents outside of Scotland are free to charge whatever fees they like with little evidence of the work that is done to earn them.

In the purpose-built sector, costs have doubled in the past ten years, and with private providers now projected to represent 42 of stock, this shows no sign of letting up. Students’ chances of accessing an affordable room in halls are therefore fairly minimal in many locations. And in social housing, the ‘bedroom tax’ has put many students, as well as some students’ families in a financially vulnerable position, in some cases putting their home at risk.

As a result, there is an absence of real choice for students, with options hugely constrained by the limited supply of housing, and the disconnect between the costs associated with most options and students’ incomes. For students with limited financial capacity, as well as international students and student parents, these choices are often more limited. With the upcoming measures in the Immigration Bill, international students who are already faced with frequent demands for six months’ or more rent up front if they can’t provide a UK-based homeowner as guarantor now face being asked to prove their immigration status to prospective landlords. This risks putting them at a still further disadvantage in the already competitive housing market.

Students often find themselves disempowered in a housing market which works for those who own the property (whether they be landlords, universities or anyone else) rather than for them. And the difficulty doesn’t end once they have found a suitable property. For many, particularly in the private rented sector, complaint seems futile as there is little accountability for landlords and letting agents who know that they will rent their property regardless of the standards of service. Local authorities have hugely scaled back on enforcement activities, so even complaining to an external body can seem pointless, with many also fearing retaliatory eviction if they appear ‘too difficult’.

Little is currently known about students’ experiences of housing, outside of very localised pieces of research undertaken by students’ unions. The most recent NUS research focussed on the supply side of the equation, with last year’s Accommodation Costs Survey looking closely at changes in the purpose-built sector. This year, we are undertaking a large scale piece of research across the UK, looking at both FE and HE, to try to gather an accurate picture of students’ experiences, both in terms of how they choose accommodation, but also how they experience it once they’re there. Although the research will largely be focussed on the private rented sector, it will also give us some headlines on all kinds of housing and help us look at housing choices and experience by demographic.

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| The political landscape |

## Key developments

Moving towards the next General Election, this is a very timely point to be looking at the private rented sector, as since the release of the 2011 census data there has been an acknowledgement of the growing role that the private rented sector plays in meeting the UK’s housing need, particularly given the decline in home ownership and the availability of social housing. Now that the issue isn’t seen as ‘merely a student one’, there is greater interest in doing something to improve it.

One of the key developments has been the DCLG Select Committee inquiry into the private rented sector. Some of the recommendations of the committee are now being carried forward, and there have been various efforts by MPs and peers to bring the private rented sector to the forefront and put the government under pressure on issues such as letting fees and letting agent regulation more broadly. Additionally there has been a renewed focus on the private rented sector in the public consciousness, as organisations such as Shelter have been running engaging and high profile campaigns. Outside of Westminster, there has also been much activity in the nations, with the Renting Homes Bill and Housing Bill (Wales), consultations on purpose-built housing in Northern Ireland and the upcoming Private Rented Sector Bill in Scotland.

## Engagement with students and the sector

Membership views have been gathered both through Zone Conference deliberation and the feedback NUS received in preparation for giving evidence to the Select Committee. We have also worked closely with organisations such as Shelter (both in England and the nations) and Unipol. It is clear that students’ unions are struggling locally to have the impact they want to on their students’ experiences of housing, though in pockets there has clearly been some success in creating change through well-supported accreditation schemes, or promoting advice to students, for example on not renting too early. However, this has often been limited in impact due to the behaviours of landlords and letting agents, and the limited capacity of local authorities to intervene.

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| Options for moving forward |

The options to take the student movement’s work on housing forward are numerous and the main avenues for exploration can be divided roughly into seeking ‘top down’ structural change through influencing decision-makers, or generating ‘bottom up’ change through supporting students as activists. It is likely that a combination of each of these kinds of intervention will have the most impact.

## Influencing decision-makers

In terms of influencing decision-makers, there are clear signs that the banning of letting agent fees in the rest of the UK is gathering momentum and stands a good chance of gaining political traction with increased evidence of public support. We have also recently seen movement from the government on some key issues in England such as a tenants’ right to redress if they’re unhappy with the service from their letting agent, and ongoing investigations into issues which were raised in the recent inquiry. These include the possibility of Rent Repayment Orders where tenants can recoup money if landlords have not provided a decent standard of service and the creation of a Tenants’ Charter and model tenancy agreement. Other issues such as putting letting agents on the same regulatory footing as estate agents, and therefore affording tenants the same kind of protection as house buyers have also been under discussion.

NUS has potentially had some success in slowing the increase of private provider rents in London and there is a possibility that, particularly if this is successful in the capital, other local authorities may consider applying similar constraints to private providers elsewhere. There is also scope to continue work on influencing rents set by universities and colleges – though it is unlikely that it would be possible to get any national regulation on this, there is clearly scope to increase students’ unions’ involvement in rent-setting and strategy. There could also be opportunities to push institutions to take their role in supporting students on housing much more seriously, either through a national requirement or through local pressure.

On arguments for broader rent control, this is an idea which has different levels of political credibility across the UK. It was recently seriously discussed in Wales, but in England, policy-makers generally prefer a free market approach and argue that rent control might lead to unintended consequences. However, there has been increasing interest in this, and perhaps more moderate forms of rent control where rent increases are regulated within longer more secure tenancies, though this is unlikely to affect many student households which often turn over tenancies fairly rapidly.

## Grassroots housing work

In terms of more grassroots, bottom up activity, there are also many opportunities for the student movement. The increasing problems in the private rented sector have led to fledgling private tenant groups and tenants’ unions in some areas, and there is the possibility of doing more to support this among the student community. Another option would be to look at developing a tenant activist development programme, where NUS could train representatives of students’ unions to train students in their rights and help to generate a more forceful and discerning group of student tenants. Alongside greater tenant representation this could prove to be a powerful tool, particularly when also considering the legacy this would leave with many of these students are likely to live in the private rented sector for a number of years.

All of these options present opportunities for NUS in continuing to develop a narrative on student housing, and to turn this narrative into action. It is important to consider how we balance pragmatism with idealism, regulation with behaviour change, and lobbying done behind closed doors with campaigning done in the public sphere. With the right approach, NUS, particularly once armed with the upcoming research, is in an ideal position to influence housing issues, particularly in the private rented sector as one of the key organisations representing tenants.

# Questions for Policy Development

**Some key questions to consider are:**

1. What might the logical next steps from the housing research be?
2. What is the right balance between NUS engaging directly with decision-makers and supporting grassroots, local action?
3. Should a particular type of housing be prioritised e.g. purpose-built or private rented sector?
4. How can students’ unions be better equipped to address local housing issues and what can NUS do to support them?
5. How can students’ unions better work on a regional basis to tackle housing issues?