



Student Homelessness in Glasgow 2022:

Experiences, Interpretations and Possible Solutions

Background

In Autumn 2022 there was insufficient accommodation to meet the requirements of incoming undergraduate and postgraduate students in parts of Scotland. While this was not the first year this has happened, and with the University system still recovering from Covid-19, the problem was significantly worse in session 2022-23, and notably so in Glasgow. Reports emerged of students with no accommodation, sofa-surfing, forced and unaffordable short-term solutions, as well as a litany of related and knock-on problems.

In Glasgow, where the problem was particularly acute, we have been able to have access to people and professionals involved in student accommodation, and also students with lived experience of these problems last Autumn, so that we can make sense of what happened, learn lessons and think about medium and long term solutions that might provide a more sustainable housing system for the student body.

For session 2023-24, the situation is different. Student numbers were around 2,000 less than planned reducing pressure in the system. At the same time, counter-measures were taken, there was a stronger degree of preparedness, and the University took a further 2,000 additional PBSA bedspace nominations, but ended up with 700 voids (vacancies) because of the lower than expected numbers. Consequently, the University was able to meet all requests for help. Yet, while it is true that there appear to be general adverse headwinds across the sector regarding international student demand, this year may only be a respite from continuing structural imbalances in supply and demand that will need to be addressed.

This research, from which a main report will follow shortly, was carried out under the auspices of the University's Road to Home initiative on homelessness in Glasgow. This project undertook an evidence review, and primary research involving in-depth qualitative interviews both with students experiencing homelessness or housing precarity, and also professionals working in student accommodation services, strategic, operational and front-line, as well as drawing out the views of different professional perspectives on future policies to grow student accommodation. It built on earlier research by the UK Collaborative Centre for Housing Evidence (CaCHE) on Purpose Built Student Accommodation for the Scottish Government (Gibb, et al, 2022), as well as wider subsequent work on student accommodation in Scotland for Unipol carried out by Boyle and Gibb .

Students' Experiences

Students were asked about their experience of seeking accommodation in the academic year 2022-2023. Reasons **why students still came to Glasgow**, during a housing shortage and without secured accommodation, included their limited awareness of a housing crisis, the time and money students had invested into securing a spot at Glasgow University, and because housing is tied to the 'university experience'. Many students, particularly those on post graduate programmes, arrived expecting to find accommodation within weeks. While domestic and undergraduate students had slightly more **awareness of the impacts of the housing shortage**, postgraduate and international students had limited knowledge.

Time, money, and effort had already been put into attaining a University place, and while students were advised not to arrive in Glasgow without secured accommodation, **deferring studies** for a year was not an option for many. Those from overseas had already paid for visa applications, travel to Glasgow, and for temporary accommodation - while trying to find permanent accommodation. Many students felt that the University did not recognise the effort students put into gaining a place when asking them to consider deferring for a year.

Due to the lengthy process of finding and securing accommodation that was suitable in Glasgow, **students had to sofa surf, or stay in hotels or Airbnb**, to continue their studies. This was expensive and impacted on their health, studies and wellbeing. Many students pointed out how there were **limited affordable options** which hindered housing search. Attempting to factor-in the rising cost of bills had meant many students had a budget which did not cover rent of accommodation near campus. Flats are not only expensive, but the quality was often poor. Thus, most students interviewed revealed they were paying upwards of £600 a month for rent. Students found that **bidding more was a way to make their applications stand out** from others and secure a tenancy agreement. Moreover, tenants also offered to pay more upfront than the standard deposit and first month's rent, to secure accommodation. This practice particularly affected international students who often could not provide a UK based guarantor.

Another barrier was **anti-student sentiment**. Landlords can refuse to rent to students and/or not take any enquiries from students. Applications online do not enquire if applicants are mature students, or if they have a family, and some felt

as if those reviewing application assumed all applying under the 'student' label were young adults with a reputation for poor treatment of housing. This also reflected the perception of greater inconvenience for landlords with students for example their perceived greater use of early notification to quit. Students can need a **guarantor** to rent, creating another barrier to securing accommodation. Some felt as though the process of getting a guarantor was a further transactions cost for letting agents and made students less attractive in a tight market. A worrying trend amongst student responses was their experience with **scams while searching for housing**. Many students turned to Facebook as another channel of finding a room or flat – however this route was less secure (and unregulated) than operating through a letting agent.

International students could not begin looking for accommodation until they had arrived in the UK, due to the **student visa restrictions**, and those travelling from abroad are only allowed to enter the UK a month before the term starts. Due to the late course application dates, and the need to secure a CAS number (Confirmation of Acceptance for Studies number) which is necessary to apply for a student visa, international postgraduate students who were interviewed did not start searching and applying for accommodation until they had secured their place at university, and then their visas and scholarships - by then PBSA and university halls are already full, meaning PG students are reliant on the private sector.

While finding accommodation and continuing studies is a stressful event, the additional stress of starting a **family** and finding suitable accommodation for a partner and child is even more demanding. In one case, moving to various short-stay, temporary accommodation while expecting a child, meant having to change maternity doctors frequently. Many students detailed how their experience of navigating the housing system was aided by a variety of **communities**. Students formed networks with those from their country of origin, amongst student societies, or found help through their religious communities and were able to use these connections to learn about the application process for housing, and in some instances to find a room or flat to rent.

Some students had requirements for their living situations based on **personal preference or religious reasons**. Some students cannot live in mixed-gender accommodation limiting the appropriate accommodation they can apply for in both university residences, PBSA and property in the private rented sector.

Most students interviewed endured temporary housing arrangements for 2-3 months, however, one interviewee was in a range of temporary accommodations from September until April. **Sofa surfing** is a type of hidden homelessness in which an individual does not have a secure address and can be living temporarily with friends and family. Students, while grateful to their friends for putting them up, had the pressure of university work, searching for permanent accommodation but also feeling inconvenient, adding strain to relationships. Staying in temporary housing arrangements also reduced their ability to focus on studies and settle in Glasgow. One student pointed out that staying in temporary housing meant they could not set up a bank account. This situation also impacted

students **mental and physical health**: a permanent address is required to register with a GP and insecure students found it hard to access the healthcare system, adding to further health related stress. One student also stressed that they had to view the property physically to ensure it was suitable for a specific health condition, which created a further barrier as certain properties only offer online viewing or require a deposit before a viewing.

Students expressed gratitude for the **emergency accommodation provided by the University** services, however, they did express concern about living in hotels. Students had to remain on campus to continue with their studies, and especially for those who needed to attend the Tier 4 Visa Checks to remain in the UK, the only option was to pay for a hotel, or if possible, to stay with friends.

Students detailed how it was a **constant and stressful process to apply for housing**, especially while in temporary housing solutions, balancing the housing search with their studies. Students also revealed they **struggled with the applications** in which you had to "pitch" either to a group looking to fill a room or to landlord – "it's like going to a job interview". Students expressed that they found their **limited housing literacy** hindered their housing search as they were unsure what to say on applications and how to apply for flats. Students also found that not being in Glasgow over the summer period hindered their ability to secure accommodation.

Professional and other Perspectives:

The project interviewed 15 professionals and advocates involved with student housing, including student representatives and front-line workers. They were asked what factors explain the shortages of student housing. While different explanations and a range of accommodation perspectives were advanced, it was still possible to identify key points.

1. Supply of and market for student rental housing. Despite the visibility and growth of purpose built student accommodation, rental market houses in multiple occupation (HMO) remain a critical indeed often dominant part of student housing supply. However, the HMO sector has been less willing to let out to students. In part this is due to the open-ended nature of the new (2017) Scottish private tenancy and the 28 days right for tenants to terminate the tenancy. Landlords have been shifting out of the student market, seeking professional workers instead, and this has significantly increased the imbalance in the market, contributing to higher new advertised rents.

Student housing demands do not operate in a vacuum. There are many other groups seeking housing in the rental market and this further worsens the situation for all. The problem is compounded by the lack of robust fine grain knowledge on rental market demand and supply, especially within specific segments such as the HMO sector. The supply side is atomised into

tens of thousands of small scale and private landlords, for whom little is robustly known about behaviour, attitudes and aspirations (including how many are now exiting the market and what then happens to their properties). And at a city or regional level, we have remarkably poor data on actual rent levels and rates of change (apart from new advertised rents). It is not surprising, consequently, that changing landlord preferences concerning who is housed were not anticipated.

2. **University procedures.** Universities provide guarantees to specific categories of students – normally (new to) Glasgow first year undergraduates and post-graduate students. These can be secured through nomination agreements with PBSA providers and student halls as well as other routes such as leaseholds or short-term arrangements with other forms of provision. University planning for student numbers needs to both accommodate these numbers and assume that the rest of the student body have ample supply from the market, and that any remaining PBSA spaces, etc. are sufficient. The University would focus on its guaranteed places but seek to remain distanced from the wider student accommodation system. This takes us into controversies about why so many students did not have accommodation, attempts to house students further afield through ad hoc agreements with other institutions and accommodation providers, and to suggest that students without accommodation defer.

However, all of Glasgow's universities are fishing in the same pool and from a relatively fixed volume of beds (or a stock that is only incrementally changing). It is also widely argued that Covid-19 had unanticipated consequences in the form of a large bubble of pent-up student demand, stoked by possible grade inflation, and the need for mid-year entrants in one particular academic session – all serving to boost student numbers and housing demand.

In a paper to the University's Senate in the Autumn of 2022, senior management argued:

- The University directly houses around 14% or one seventh of the student population and has done so since around 2017 but have expanded the number of beds that they have nominations for with PBSA providers (and as we noted, did so again for the 2023-24 session).
- Student accommodation guarantees were to first year (new to Glasgow) undergraduates and post-graduates, though only the UG guarantee could be met. One in twenty-five PG students apply for University accommodation but this could not be met in 2022-23 (and was subsequently dropped as a guarantee in 2023-24).
- The accommodation problem was, in their view, triggered by the volume of students facing a shrinking private rented sector, but they rejected that this was also due to rising admissions (which were considered

to be stable).

- Their immediate responses included – setting up inquiry helplines, taking as much short term alternative accommodation as they could e.g. serviced apartments, deploying increased hardship funds and providing increased and enhanced information to students. By 2023-24 they intended to take on more nominations to PBSA, work to better understand private renting market dynamics and in the long term own more accommodation, but also work with the City Council and the Scottish government to improve relevant housing and student accommodation policy

3. **Student characteristics.** Many new and continuing students clearly needed support and lacked housing knowledge specific to where they could live, something compounded by the urgency of their needs and the lack of advice and knowledge and sources of impartial independent advice. The modern student body is also more demanding, seeking different housing solutions to reflect their varied demography. Different ethnicities, cultures, family types and the need for adapted properties - do not seem to be reflected by the offers available from different providers. The lack of choice is one issue; another is the lack of range of affordability in new investment in the PBSA sector which continues to move upmarket and undersupplies more basic or middle level property.

Responses

Building new halls, or indeed more PBSA, or finding ways to reverse the decline in private renting to supply for students, will all take time. They also bring risk, and in the case of the mainstream PRS may not be possible in foreseeable circumstances. Universities can provide more bed spaces through further nominations agreements with existing providers (though this must be something of a zero-sum game which of itself does not benefit the city as a whole). They can also provide more temporary and short-term accommodation through leasing in the short term lets, hotels, serviced apartments and even looking further afield for surplus accommodation elsewhere. None of these should be viewed as anything other than crisis measures. Universities may also face reduced demand either through numerical caps or because, as happened this session, numbers fall reducing demand. There remains a strong market for PBSA provision. Boyle and Gibb (2023, p.5) note:

'A recent blog by Icení ... reflects on the pipeline of new PBSA developments in both cities. For instance, after a moratorium in new developments ended in Glasgow in 2021, there have since been 11 new applications and several more in the pipeline, reflecting wider ambitions that the city has to double the number of beds to 40,000 by 2035. While there are objections and challenges to some of these planning applications, and a couple of areas have been redlined because of studentification worries ... the wider support for the provision is clear. It can also be seen in the large number of repurposed buildings across the West End and City Centre now offering student accommodation.'

Casual monitoring of housing news since October 2023 identifies new and updated PBSA planning application stories in the city roughly on a fortnightly basis (sometimes more frequently). These are mainly in and around the city centre. Many redundant (or otherwise non-performing) buildings in the city have now been transformed into student accommodation including the former ballet school, a former trade union building and a building that was previously a hostel for the homeless. Glasgow city council planning has redlined a couple of areas in terms of over-supply of PBSA, but the council is actively encouraging student accommodation slightly further afield e.g. in Govan. The important point, however, is that the pipeline of PBSA investment has to pass planning permission and then be constructed – this takes years rather than months.

Suggested ten practical solutions for student housing, more broadly:

1. Revise and publicise the University guarantor scheme, wherein it takes on the critical role of guarantor for (typically) international students.
2. Develop better, safer late-night transport to support students living off campus but well connected across the city e.g support later underground running and develop with Glasgow Metro transport proposals with a student-centred focus. Reassurance in this area could support more off-campus development of student accommodation.
3. The city council and HEIs should think strategically about PBSA and student halls' provision where gap sites exist in the city centre but make more effort to deliver affordable and mid-range provision.
4. De-prioritise locally based students from University/PBSA nominated provision – this is argued to be a luxury more appropriate to better balanced student accommodation markets and something that could be reversed in the future.
5. Extend cut-off points for student applications, especially for international students to overcome the late start to accommodation search many found themselves facing in the run up to the 2022-23 session. Students and other advocates argued to reinstate the guarantee for post graduate students.
6. Several voiced a need to grow student numbers more sustainably, to take much more account of trends in the PRS and the capacity of PBSA – in different ways arguing that what was needed is a growth in supply, assistance to encourage private landlords to let to students, alongside a softening in student demand – at least until the accommodation market is better

balanced.

7. In the medium term, several of the professionals argued for a more data-driven and evidenced approach to both student numbers and critically the understanding of the accommodation supply side, encouraging the HEIs in the city to work together to plan and share intelligence, but also perhaps to work more collegially on investment and market interventions.

8. Students and frontline professionals stressed the need to enhance pastoral support at this critical time for students, to build hubs of housing and accommodation knowledge, legal advice, impartial expertise, FAQs and good practice to help people new to the city and Scotland to navigate its accommodation system. It was suggested that at the city level, there might be investment in a non-profit student lettings agency which could perform several of these functions.

9. Student accommodation should be an explicit part of the city's housing strategy – it is both a problem in terms of outcomes and has significant knock-on effects on other households, land use, neighbourhoods and the supply of graduate careers and the future prosperity of the city. It needs to be a formal priority problem to be evidenced and understood analytically. Three priority knowledge gaps to address are: better understanding of the operation of the student PRS; clarity about student market segments and their size across the student population; and, eliminating our still poor understanding of student affordability, sources of income and its seasonality.

10. Many argued for a citywide and indeed a national taskforce pushing for more supply, both appropriate and affordable student accommodation. This would require a long-term plan to rebalance the student accommodation market with properties suitable to the varying needs and demands from the sector and future-proofed to be resilient to shocks and risks to that market. This should include innovative joint venture partnerships where the HEIs retain a degree of control over how such developments operate. Several also thought that the PBSA offer needs to be more diverse, with more affordable elements. This needs to be part of decisions over planning permission and the long-term sustainability of such developments. Others proposed alternative models: student housing co-operatives; long term PRS leasing; student hotels for sessional and short-term student needs; joint ventures with housing associations, and repurposing of redundant university buildings and sites within the ongoing estate redevelopment of the Gilmorehill campus.