



Student Experiences of Bristol's Housing Crisis

Written by the Future Research Leaders:

Eva Rabin-Holmes, Ishika Mora, Jacobus Petrus van der Merwe, Magdalene Ng, Max Graham,
& Mia Mohammad Rosli



Supported by the Research & Insights Team

Dr. Gabriel Knott-Fayle

Dr. Maya Al-Khouja

May 2026

Acknowledgements

We extend our sincere thanks to the students who participated in our focus groups for generously sharing their invaluable stories and experiences with us to help produce this piece of research.

We also thank Bristol SU's Research and Insight Team for enabling us to grow as researchers and supporting the Future Research Leaders project, with special thanks to Dr. Gabriel Knott-Fayle for guiding us on a weekly basis and seeing us through every stage of our project with patience and motivation. We appreciate Dr. Maya Al-Khouja for supporting us as we progressed and giving additional perspectives on research skills.

To Debbie Spearman and the SU's Housing Advice Team, it was a highlight sharing our progress with you and developing the research around work done by advisory teams like yours. Thank you kindly for your input and contributions to our discussions.

We thank the external partners and charities who joined in discussion with us, shared their perspectives and were open to our findings: Councillor Barry Parsons, Chair of the Homes and Housing Delivery Committee at Bristol City Council, Nancy Caston-Hawkes from Housing Matters, Daisy Picking and Rebecca from Bristol Fair Renting Campaign.

We also want to highlight Sharan Khemlani, who was a Future Research Leader in 2025, for generously sharing her lessons and suggestions with us and Amy Palmer for sparking our thoughts on how to tailor our research to different audiences.

Finally, we thank the UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) for funding the Future Research Leaders project and enabling this research.

Disclaimer

The findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the sponsoring or cited organisations.

Executive Summary

This research project explores the challenges that students of a lower socio-economic background face in securing and residing in private housing in Bristol, conducted through focus group discussions. Despite the focus on lower socio-economic backgrounds, many of our findings and recommendations relate to the student body as a whole and non-student renters in Bristol.

We found that students faced a myriad of challenges including (1) a lack of affordable housing that meets quality preferences and therefore sacrificing quality for cost, (2) quality issues such as mould and heating negatively impacting students' health and wellbeing, (3) a power imbalance in the relationships between landlords and student renters leading to disempowerment and, (4) the widespread use of informal networks for renting support as well as for risky practices of resistance against landlords.

In response to these challenges and the upcoming Renters' Rights Act, we propose solutions of (1) reviewing and clarifying policies to address student concerns, (2) increasing accessibility of resources on private renting and support services, (3) promoting community campaigns and charity efforts, and (4) building a shared knowledge bank where students, external partners and charities can share success stories and resources through a central platform.



Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	i
Executive Summary	ii
Introduction	1
The Project	2
Methodology	2
Findings:	4
1. Financial Pressures as an Obstacle to Student Living	4
2. Issues and Impacts of Housing Quality on Health and Wellbeing	5
3. Student Disempowerment in Relationships with Landlords	7
4. Informal Networks and Practices of Resistance	8
Recommendations:	10
1. Recommendations for Policy and Policy Enforcement	10
2. Increase Accessibility of Education and Support Services	11
3. Promoting Community Campaigns and Mutual Exchange	11
4. Building Community Knowledge Banks	12
Conclusion	13
References	14

Introduction

Across the UK, Bristol has seen the largest rental housing price increases, growing by 60.2% from 2015 to 2023 (Office for National Statistics, as cited by Jones, 2023). This has situated the Bristol student housing market in a deepening ‘crisis’ (Richards, 2024), with factors such as unaffordable housing affecting students from lower socio-economic backgrounds disproportionately (Bristol City Council, 2024). Documented challenges include spiralling rent prices, inconvenience of housing locations, housing quality issues, and poor landlord responses (Morris, 2025; Richards 2024; Bristol City Council, 2023).

The incoming Renters’ Right Act 2025 that seeks to address the power imbalance between landlords and renters aims to ease some of these challenges. In this research we explore students’ lived experiences with renting in Bristol’s private housing sector, given the broader context of Bristol’s housing crisis and changing policy landscape. Students experience housing insecurity along with the rest of Bristol’s renters. Here we examine how students experience and navigate this insecurity in order to advocate for more urgent action and offer possible recommendations.

The Project

In January 2026, as Future Research Leaders (FRLs), we met with Councillor Barry Parsons, Housing Matters, and the Bristol SU housing advice team to explore their work and the current housing landscape. What was clear was that the housing crisis is multifaceted and heavily intertwined with many other social issues including health, economic, and employment inequality. This project is rooted in the belief that students need to do more to contribute to the fight for housing justice in Bristol, but also that students' voices need to be better represented in those spaces.

Given the negative impact of financial instability on housing pressures, we decided to focus on students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, exploring the research question: ***What challenges do students of lower socio-economic backgrounds face in securing and residing in housing in Bristol?***

Methodology

We decided focus groups would be the best methodology for this exploratory research question.

When thinking of recruitment, we found there are challenges in defining lower socio-economic status, as the definition, and therefore how to study it, is contested (as explored in Antonoplis, 2023). We used 'socio-economic status' as a set of structural features that guide the decisions and behaviours people take instead of as a unitary property (Antonoplis 2023: 284). Any way of defining socio-economic status has issues, but we chose this way because it allowed for self-identification, and acknowledged that socio-economic status need not be thought of as 'real' and is instead regarded as a set of properties rather than a property itself (Antonoplis 2023: 284).

Therefore, we defined ‘lower socio-economic’ with the criteria of:

- being the first generation in their family to go to university
- receiving financial support from the University (e.g. bursary)
- working during term time to support yourself financially
- eligibility for free school meals (UK students)
- studies sponsored by government, or a student loan (International students)
- self-identifying as working-class or from a lower socioeconomic background

Participants self-reported which of the above criteria applied to them when they signed up to take part in the focus groups. The average number of criteria self-reported by the 14 focus group participants was 2.5 (out of a possible 5), all participants self-identified as coming from a working-class or lower socio-economic background.

The focus groups were publicised through various channels such as Bristol SU’s Research and Insights newsletter, SU societies and University departments. Of the 95 people that signed up, 30 met enough criteria to be invited to a focus group, with 14 eventually attending the focus groups.

We carried out data collection through three focus groups in March-April 2026. Each focus group was moderated and noted by different members of our team. A discussion guide was used to facilitate discussion, with questions covering topics such as looking for and securing housing, as well as the challenges of residing in housing.

We analysed the data using thematic analysis which involved an initial inductive coding, tidying up codes, and building themes. The key themes identified were (1) Financial Pressures as an Obstacle to Student Living, (2) Issues and Impacts of Housing Quality on Health and Wellbeing, (3) Student Disempowerment in Relationships with Landlords, and (4) Informal Networks and Practices of Resistance.

Findings

1. Financial Pressures as an Obstacle to Student Living

Financial constraints impact how students navigate the housing market, resulting in trade-offs between the cost and quality of their housing. Participants reported that many of the properties advertised by agencies exceeded their budgets. As a result, participants had to weigh affordability against considerations like distance to university, the safety of their neighbourhood, and overall quality. High costs often led participants to compromise on these factors to fit their budget, causing a disconnect between themselves and flatmates who had the financial security to afford higher quality housing.

“I prioritised whether I could afford it and if it’s safe. Quality is okay but as long as I can afford the place, I’m willing to compromise on that.”

Participants also perceived competition in securing high quality and affordable housing as early as possible. Houses that were cheaper and better quality saw high demand and are often taken off the market quickly. As such, participants felt pressure to secure housing as soon as possible, as they believe that availability will decrease and prices will increase as the year progresses.

In addition to rent, there are ‘hidden costs’ regarding maintenance issues and transportation that put further pressure on student finances. Because of the distance to university, one participant had to attend lectures on an E-Scooter. Commuting to university in this way put a strain on their finances, so they reported consistently skipping lectures to avoid this cost. In cases of disrepair resulting from poor housing quality, participants have had to pay for supplies themselves to carry out repairs that fell under the landlord's responsibility. These hidden costs were unexpected and not accounted for in students’ budgets.

“Coming to and from university was 45 minutes long each way. One-hour lectures felt pointless, since I’d be paying for public transport to get to university”

Participants agreed that bills were also prohibitively high, which is particularly troubling during the colder winter months where heating is more expensive and necessary. When it comes to bills, we found that students were unclear about whether their rent includes electricity and heating. Setting up bill packages and payments is an unclear process due to their inexperience as renters and a lack of help and guidance from landlords regarding these arrangements.

Securing and paying deposits also contributes to housing pressures. Participants reported instances of landlords and agencies withholding their deposits because they had not cleaned or repaired the property, even if they had met the required standard of property maintenance. The possibility for deposits to be withheld or reduced is a worry that also affects students.

2. Issues and Impacts of Housing Quality on Health and Wellbeing

Housing quality issues do not only inconvenience students, but also have significant impacts on physical wellbeing, mental health, and academic life.

Of these quality concerns, participants most frequently brought up mould. They described avoiding their own accommodation, spending long hours on campus, or even returning home to escape unhealthy environments. Notably, exposure to mould has had a detrimental impact on two students with asthma, aligning with research linking indoor mould exposure to respiratory complications, allergic reactions, and even mental health distress (Lanthier-Veilleux, Baron and Généreux, 2016). Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are more likely to live in older, poorly maintained, and overcrowded housing where mould and dampness are more common (Holden *et al.*, 2023). Since they often lack the financial means to move out, mould and dampness exacerbate existing health inequalities by connecting physical vulnerability with financial insecurity.

“I have sensitive skin and asthma, so when there’s mould it’s not good for my health. I’ve ended up spending more time at university to avoid being in a poor living situation.”

“The doctors say I can’t get better if I’m constantly in that environment.”

Other than physical consequences, poor housing conditions also affect students' comfort, security, and academic focus. Participants frequently cited dysfunctional heating and water supply as distressing, especially during the winter period. To cope with this, students slept in multiple layers, enduring cold temperatures, or relied on campus facilities for necessities such as bathing. These conditions result in not only discomfort but also reduced academic motivation, with some participants naming poor living conditions as a reason for decreased productivity. This is backed by studies, which suggest that when housing stress is high, our brains have less space left for academic focus (Broton, 2021).

“Because of my living situation, I sometimes don’t want to do university work”

“We accepted that the flat would be really cold, and there’s nothing you could do about it”

Maintenance failures and substandard property management further inhibit academic work. Participants reported delays in appliance repairs and unresolved dampness and leaks worsened living environments over time. Many participants recalled performing responsibilities that are typically expected of landlords, including scrubbing mould, buying cleaning supplies, or using paint. Other students adjusted their routines by ventilating rooms constantly, modifying study habits, or avoiding spending time in their rooms entirely.

For students from lower socioeconomic groups, unresolved maintenance issues do not simply increase daily stress and financial strain, but also reduce the time and mental energy available for academics (Broton, 2021). This results in a living environment that conflicts with academic success, reinforcing socioeconomic inequalities in educational contexts.

“The landlord gave us anti-mould paint and a scrub.”

“I ended up spending more time at university to avoid being in a poor living situation.”

3. Student Disempowerment in Relationships with Landlords

“Even if they’re breaking the law, we can’t do anything about it, they just do what they want.”

Many participants described a persistent “us versus them” dynamic between tenants and landlords, reflecting a sense of mistrust and perceived power imbalance. Students often felt disadvantaged, expecting exploitation or dismissive treatment from landlords. The fear of being blamed was prevalent, creating reluctance to raise issues about their living situations. Participants consistently reported becoming disillusioned due to irregular and unclear billing practices. Many described feeling frustrated and exhausted by misleading or incomplete tenancy information and further discrepancies in charges which were often difficult to verify or challenge. This sense of dissatisfaction was further compounded by inconsistencies between advertised property conditions and the reality of moving in, undermining trust and contributing to an overall negative rental experience.

Landlords were perceived as taking advantage of students' need and desperation to secure housing, making them live in unacceptable conditions. Poor quality housing, false or misleading advertising, opaque and inconsistent charges, and withholding deposits were all typical of student renting experiences. Yet, students felt insecure in their housing rights due to inexperience in navigating the housing market and lacking established support networks. This is particularly pronounced for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, especially in the cases of first-generation university students who may have more limited access to resources and support systems. This disempowerment is also especially difficult for international students, who felt that landlords know they are in a vulnerable position in an unfamiliar place, and therefore are at risk of being taken advantage of.

“It's exhausting having to spend energy into something where no one is doing anything to fix the issues at hand.”

“Because we’re students... we’re used to it.”

Poor, inconsistent, and unclear communication with landlords led to confusion, delays in repairs, and inadequate responses. As a result, students were uncertain if their concerns are being addressed.

These experiences contributed to feelings of frustration and resignation, reinforcing unfavourable perceptions of both housing quality and relationships with landlords. Over time, these patterns reinforce negative perceptions of landlord responsiveness and reliability, further disincentivising students to report issues and contributes to a broader perception that student tenants receive lower-priority treatment. Students were wary of landlords as there were concerns about unannounced property access, dismissive treatment and the possibility of being blamed or charged for issues within the property. This intensified feelings of discomfort and a lack of control, making students more hesitant to report any issues.

4. Informal Networks and Practices of Resistance

Students used various strategies to help navigate finding and living in private housing. These strategies were often built on informal student networks of support, and sometimes involved risky behaviour. Because students make such big use of their own networks and social circles to navigate housing issues, official policies like the Renters' Rights Act only address part of the systems students use to navigate housing and don't necessarily build on the informal structures many students rely on.

When finding private housing, students referred to circles of friends, family and online group chats to warn others about landlords, give advice, and to suggest housing options to each other. For example, a student who was unable to find suitable housing via their own search eventually signed for a property that a friend found for them. As part of this, students seemed very open to their friends about how much they are currently paying for housing and are willing to pay in future.

“The [student-led support session] was helpful. I was advised not to go with [named housing agency] because it was not that trustworthy. They gave advice on bills, cheap areas, students living area.”

These networks were also used to find potential roommates and then connect with them before meeting in-person. This was seen as a safety mechanism, because students can ‘evaluate’ potential roommates and see if they get along before committing.

“I didn’t know who I was going to live with. I also messaged people on Facebook daily.”

Students relied on these informal networks to share bad experiences and get advice on how to respond. This included drafting emails or correspondence to their landlords and agencies together. Students said this is important to make sure their requests are well received, as they believe the style of communication impacts how likely the landlord is to respond to their requests and to act on the issues.

“If there is a problem in the house, we usually discuss wording together because how you phrase emails is important.”

There was also a trend of students asking their parents to help with the communication with their landlords and to help them navigate issues and understand their rights. Where this was often a first-resort contact, it puts students from lower socio-economic backgrounds at a disadvantage if their parents lack the time, resources or knowledge to support them in this area.

“I texted them around 10 times, called them, I even stopped paying rent until they fixed the issue, and they ended up fixing it. My advice is that if you need help you should probably do that too.”

In extreme cases of resistance against landlord inaction, some students saw withholding rent as the only way to get landlords to respond and act on maintenance requests. In cases where the outcome of withholding rent was the fixing of maintenance issues are indeed fixed, these students proceed to tell their friends about this method in their social circles and suggest it as a viable option. Given the risks involved in this kind of action, the uncoordinated proliferation of it through informal networks potentially puts students at risk of legal and financial repercussions.

Recommendations

Challenges faced by students in the University of Bristol are not unique; similar sentiments have been shared across various reports and academic literature (Bolton, Hubble and Wilson, 2020; Morris, 2025; Bristol City Council, 2023), highlighting the urgency of tackling the housing crisis for both students and the wider rental public. Our recommendations respond to student challenges through various channels: policy recommendations, education and support services, the promotion of community campaigns and networks, and building a knowledge bank.

1. Recommendations for Policy and Policy Enforcement

Students are struggling with increasing rent prices. To combat this, we propose a rent freeze on rental markets alongside proposals to institute a rental control model to increase access to affordable private housing (Shelter, 2026).

Furthermore, housing market rates should be made transparent to all so that students can be aware of what constitutes unreasonable rent raises. There needs to be better transparency around costs and profit levels of student accommodation so that student welfare is still at the forefront of student accommodation with deliverance of value-for-money properties (Bolton, Hubble and Wilson, 2020).

To increase the volume of accessible student housing, the council should enforce the policy of 35% affordable bed spaces in purpose-built student accommodations so that students do not have to sacrifice quality and location of housing for lower costs (Bristol City Council, 2024). Moreover, shared experiences over poor landlord responses to housing issues highlights the urgency of holding landlords to account through formal action so that landlords will take maintenance issues seriously. This includes the extension of Awaab's Law to the private rented sector so that serious issues such as damp and mold are not taken lightly (Shelter, 2026).

2. Increase Accessibility of Education and Support Services

Both international students making decisions at a distance (Unipol, 2024), as well as Home students, a significant proportion of whom live away from home (Bolton, Hubble and Wilson, 2020), need more accessible housing support. While not explicitly discussed, our findings emphasize a need for better access to information specifically targeted toward student renters. This applies to both the Renters' Right Act 2025 as well as current housing policies, educating students on what to expect when privately renting, including subjects such as housing contracts, their rights, and ways to report issues. However, knowledge and awareness are only part of the story.

Students may be aware of their rights but too disempowered or intimidated to practice them. Introducing accessible legal services for students who may want to challenge their landlords such as law clinics or waiving costs may empower students to better access their rights, especially rent reviews or discrimination policies. International students within the focus group also suggested more support from the universities in securing guarantors to ease their entry barriers into the private rented sector.

3. Promoting Community Campaigns and Mutual Exchange

Students should not have to settle for poor quality housing that does not reflect cost, nor accept exploitative landlords that take advantage of their transitory identity (Morris, 2025). Students can wield a collective voice to make change and influence decision-making through platforms such as the Bristol SU community organisers, or by joining campaigns such as the Bristol Fair Renting Campaign. The 'Break the Mould' campaign can also gain wider traction within the student community (Flanders, 2025), helping students recognise that their challenges are shared rather than unique. This, in turn, can foster a sense of empowerment and encourage them to engage in positive change for themselves and the wider community.

4. Building Community Knowledge Banks

Students often rely on their friends or other informal networks for housing advice. Creating a knowledge bank as a way for students to share their experiences or their success cases will allow students to build on each other's success stories, passing advice to different students who may be facing a similar situation in the private renting sphere. If the knowledge bank goes through a central team, submissions can be vetted so that potentially risky stories like the withholding of rent are not suggested. Additionally, the knowledge bank can receive contributions from outside charities or campaign platforms to bridge student experiences and public experiences. This knowledge bank can both showcase successful campaigns and actions, and help renters better understand the legal and practical aspects of renting and their rights.

Conclusion

Students, like many Bristolians, face challenges due to the housing crisis. This should be seen as a source of solidarity with other citizens. Even if some issues are specific to students and more prevalent in lower socio-economic backgrounds, progress towards addressing the housing crisis for any group can support all Bristolians.

By conducting focus groups on the challenges students of a lower socio-economic background face in securing and residing in housing in Bristol, our findings highlight that these students often opt for lower quality housing due to financial constraints, thus sacrificing their initial quality preferences. This reduction in quality opens issues like mould and inconsistent heating, which then harms students' social, physical, and mental standing. Mistrust between student renters and landlords alongside poor responses to maintenance requests have further resulted in disempowering relationships and a hopelessness in exercising housing rights. Students navigate policy and official platform constraints by relying heavily on informal support networks to secure housing and access advice. These informal social renting networks can promote risky practices of resistance such as the withholding of rent, which further worsens the relationships between students and landlords.

Based on our research, the key to addressing these issues is through reviewing existing policy from a student mindset, increasing accessibility to support for students, promoting interconnected work between organisations, campaigns and projects from across Bristol regardless of student status and building a shared knowledge bank to promote positivity around success stories and share solutions.

References

Antonoplis, S. (2023) 'Studying Socioeconomic Status: Conceptual Problems and an Alternative Path Forward', *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 18(2), pp. 275-292. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/17456916221093615>

Bolton, P., Hubble, S. and Wilson, W. (2020) *Student Accommodation FAQs*. Available at: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-8721/> (Accessed: May 19, 2026).

Bristol City Council (2023) *Bristol Living Rent Commission*. Available at: <https://www.bristolonecity.com/wp-content/pdf/Living-Rent-Commission-combined-report-2023b.pdf> (Accessed: May 5, 2026).

Bristol City Council (2024) *Managing the Development of Purpose-Built Student Accommodation Topic Paper*. Available at: <https://www.bristol.gov.uk/files/documents/7600-tpc006-managing-the-development-of-purpose-built-student-accommodation-topic-paper-april-2024/file>. (Accessed: May 18, 2026).

Broton, K.M. (2021) 'Poverty in American Higher Education', *Journal of Postsecondary Student Success*, 1(2), pp.18–45. Available at: https://doi.org/10.33009/fsop_jpss129147

Flanders, N. (2025) 'Break The Mould: What We Want to Do', *Epigram*, 10 February. Available at: <https://epigram.org.uk/break-the-mould-what-we-want-to-do/> (Accessed: May 19, 2026).

Holden, K.A., Lee, A.R., Hawcutt, D.B. and Sinha, I.P. (2023) 'The Impact of Poor Housing and Indoor Air Quality on Respiratory Health in Hhildren', *Breathe*, 19(2). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1183/20734735.0058-2023>

Jones, N. (2023) *Redevelopment of Private Rental Prices Statistics, Impact Analysis, UK: December 2023*. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/housing/articles/redevelopmentofprivaterentalpricesstatisticsimpactanalysisuk/december2023> (Accessed: 26 May 2026).

Lanthier-Veilleux, M., Baron, G. and Généreux, M. (2016) 'Respiratory Diseases in University Students Associated with Exposure to Residential Dampness or Mold', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 13(11). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph13111154>

Morris, K. (2025) 'Another Brick in the Wall: The Student Housing Crisis in the UK and the ICESCR', *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights*, 43(1), pp. 12–30. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1177/09240519251318141>

Richards, M. (2024) 'Navigating Bristol's Student Rental Crisis', *Epigram*, 24 October. Available at: <https://epigram.org.uk/student-housing-crisis/> (Accessed: May 6, 2026).

Shelter (2026) *Demand Fair Renting for Bristol*. Available at: <https://campaigns.shelter.org.uk/demand-fair-renting-bristol> (Accessed: May 19, 2026).

Unipol (2024) *International Student Housing Survey (2024)*. Available at: <https://www.unipol.org.uk/media/eamh54s5/the-international-student-housing-survey-briefing-paper.pdf> (Accessed: March 7, 2026).