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**UNDERSTANDING HOW CARDIFF METROPOLITAN
UNIVERSITY STUDENTS PERCEIVE AND EXPERIENCE THE
IMPACT OF THEIR HOUSING CONDITIONS ON THEIR
HEALTH AND WELLBEING**

(Final Project submitted under the SHS6200 module)

TAYLOR WOOD

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	4
1.0 Abstract	5
2.0 Introduction	5
3.0 Background	6
3.1 Health and Wellbeing	6
3.2 Housing in Wales	7
4.0 Literature Review	7
4.1 Cold and Damp Homes	7
4.2 Overcrowding.....	8
4.3 Fire Safety.....	9
4.4 Landlord/letting agency relationships with tenants	10
4.5 Gap Analysis.....	11
5.0 Methodology	12
5.1 Introduction to Methodology.....	12
5.2 Research Design	12
5.3 Research Method	12
5.4 Sampling Strategy	13
5.5 Recruitment Process	13
5.6 Data Analysis	13
5.7 Ethical Considerations	14
6.0 Findings	15
.....	15
6.1 Housing Conditions + Maintenance	15
6.2 Impact on Student Health and Wellbeing.....	16
6.3 Disruption to Daily Life	17
6.4 Neglect + Normalisation	18
7.0 Discussion	19
7.1 Damp, Mould and Cold and Wellbeing.....	19
7.2 Student Health and Wellbeing	19
7.3 Overcrowding and Disruption to Daily Life	20
7.4 Fire Safety.....	21
7.5 Landlord and Letting Agency Practices, and the Normalisation of Conditions.....	21

7.6 Strengths, Limitations and Transferability	22
8.0 Conclusion	23
References	24

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1.0 Abstract

This study explored how students at Cardiff Metropolitan University perceive and experience the impact of housing conditions on their health and wellbeing. Cardiff Metropolitan University will be shortened to 'CMU' throughout. Student housing has been recognised as public health concern, impacting physical and mental health, and academic performance. A qualitative research design was used to gain an insight into students lived experiences. Semi-structured interviews of eight undergraduate students living in student accommodation were analysed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework.

The four key themes identified were: housing conditions and maintenance, impacts on health and wellbeing, disruption to daily life, and neglect and normalisation. Frequent issues were around damp, mould, cold temperatures, overcrowding, structural deterioration and inconsistent fire safety measures. These conditions lead to stress, anxiety, sleep disruption, reduced motivation and lower productivity. Those living in higher-quality accommodation had more positive wellbeing compared to those that lived in lower-quality accommodation and faced multiple issues with their housing.

The findings establish that housing quality plays a central role in student wellbeing, highlighting the demand for improved standards, greater engaged management and upgraded support for students in private rented housing.

2.0 Introduction

The health and wellbeing of students has become an increasing public health concern. In this study, the term 'Health and wellbeing' encompasses physical, social and mental health. This study will examine how Cardiff Metropolitan University students are affected by all three based on the conditions of their housing. Evidence suggests that students experience academic, financial and social pressures such as moving away from home and trying to meet new people and students may experience social isolation which has a negative impact on their health and wellbeing (Mofatteh, 2020).

There are different types of accommodation that students in the UK can live in. These can be halls of residence which are owned by the university that students apply to, and are a way of branching out, or shared housing that is privately rented from either a landlord directly or through a letting agency (Shelter Cymru, 2024). Student housing has been linked to health and wellbeing in different sources, including a survey looking at students' views on housing, in which students reported becoming ill from the conditions of the house (Cardiff Students' Union, 2023). Another survey investigated Welsh students' housing conditions where students said their housing impacted their health and wellbeing (Shelter

Cymru, 2021). Some of the issues listed by students are damp, heating and landlord ignorance which will be explored in this study (Butler, 2026).

Students that live in poor housing may experience lower academic achievements (Baranyi et al., 2025) and in Cardiff, 1 in 5 residents are students (Creative Cardiff, 2026), meaning a large population group is being affected by their housing.

The aim of this research is to explore how university students perceive and experience the impact of their housing conditions on their health and wellbeing. The research will look at how students experience their housing conditions, explore how these conditions affect physical health (illness, sleep) and mental wellbeing (stress, mood, university performance), identify coping strategies that students use when faced with poor housing conditions and examine students' awareness of landlord or university support in relation to housing and well-being.

3.0 Background

3.1 Health and Wellbeing

Physical health isn't just being free from disease, it is the human body being able to complete daily tasks efficiently while influenced by various elements such as diet, exercise, and genetics (Contextual Consulting, 2026). According to Wang et al. (2023), social wellbeing is the health of the body and mind and will only be achieved if social and political dynamics such as sexism, chauvinism, and extremism no longer exist.

Mental health is defined as an individual's overall psychological and emotional state (Young Minds, 2026). According to the World Health Organisation (2026) mental health can impact the way individuals effectively manage life's stresses, fulfil their potential, engage productively in work and education, and make meaningful contributions to their community. A survey conducted in England and Wales identified depression and anxiety as the most prevalent mental health conditions, with individuals aged 16-24 being disproportionately affected. The prevalence rate within this age group increased from 17.5% in 2007 to 25.8% in 2023–2024 (Centre for Mental Health, 2025; Mind, 2025). Furthermore, data from HESA (2025) indicates that the student population aged 16-24 has risen by over 100,000 since 2020, increasing from 1,737,020 to 1,844,500 in 2024. This growth trajectory suggests a growing number of students may be vulnerable to mental health challenges, highlighting the increasing importance of research in this area. Students are more vulnerable to mental health problems because the transition to university can include moving away from home meaning they lose emotional support networks and must be financially independent (Lewis and Stiebahl, 2025). These experiences can negatively affect academic performance and lead to students quitting university (Campbell et al.,

2022). Exposure to poor housing conditions may exacerbate the pressures and stress already associated with university life.

3.2 Housing in Wales

Housing quality is a determinant of health, meaning it can possibly effect people's mental and physical health (Public Health England, 2018). Private rented housing in Wales is regulated by the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS), which is used by local authorities to assess potential risks to occupants' health and safety (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2006). A survey conducted in Wales found that 53% of students were privately renting Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) (Cardiff Students' Union and Shelter Cymru, 2023). Furthermore, Welsh Government (2025) data indicates that 50% of HHSRS assessments between 2023 and 2024 were conducted in HMOs. During this period, Category 1 hazards - defined as posing a serious and immediate risk to health and safety (Stafford Borough Council, 2026) - were identified in 34% of assessed properties. A healthy house should be free from hazards such as mould (Bentley et al., 2025) and this data suggests that a substantial proportion of students may be living in housing that poses significant risks to their health and wellbeing.

4.0 Literature Review

4.1 Cold and Damp Homes

Individuals living in properties that are damp are more likely to experience a decline in health and well-being. This may arise from the smell associated with damp, visible damp on belongings or from the stigma of having damp within a home (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2006). Such experiences can exacerbate symptoms of depression and anxiety, which, as outlined in section 3.0, are the two most prevalent mental health conditions amongst students, highlighting damp as an important issue to address.

Liddell and Guiney (2015) conducted a review that examined evidence on the relationship between cold and damp housing and their effects on mental well-being and identified an association between these conditions and sub-par mental well-being. However, the study is limited by a relatively small evidence base, which reduces the strength of the conclusions. Additionally, the review considers cold and damp conditions simultaneously, making it difficult to decipher the independent effects of each factor on mental well-being. Furthermore, the study focuses on mental well-being, with limited consideration of physical well-being impacts, so deciphering which one is impacted the most is restricted.

These findings are supported by the World Health Organisation (2018), which used wide-ranging systematic reviews and data from around the world to create the WHO Housing and Health Guidelines. These guidelines highlight that homes with inadequate temperatures can contribute towards “poor respiratory and cardiovascular outcomes”, and that insulated homes “reduced the odds of poor mental health”. This evidence base supports the argument that cold homes have an impact on both mental and physical health, therefore reinforcing Liddell and Guiney’s (2015) conclusions about damp and cold.

Furthermore, damp as a factor on its own can negatively impact mental well-being through its association with mould growth. Mould can develop from penetrating damp, rising damp and condensation (BCP Council, 2026). Exposure to mould has been linked to poorer mental health outcomes (Gatto et al., 2024). In addition, guidance published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2026) highlights that mould exposure can lead to physical health issues as well as mental well-being issues. These can be respiratory conditions and skin irritation, further supporting the argument that damp housing conditions contribute to both physical and mental health deterioration.

4.2 Overcrowding

Section 3 identifies housing quality as a determinant of health. Overcrowding is an important component of this and is associated with poorer mental and physical health outcomes in both adults and children (National Institute for Health and Care Research, 2024; Wilk et al., 2025).

A qualitative study conducted by Eveleigh et al. (2025) in London explored the impact of overcrowded housing on tenant health and well-being. The findings were analysed using the Social Ecological Model, which allowed consideration of impacts on health and well-being across individual, household and wider societal levels. Key themes identified were lack of privacy, increased family conflict and heightened feelings of stress due to the stigma associated with having a small living space (Eveleigh et al., 2025). Participants reported that the overcrowded conditions contributed towards emotional distress and anxiety, suggesting that overcrowding has an impact on mental well-being.

However, this study only has a relatively small sample size (n=47) and is geographically restricted, with only two London boroughs considered compared to the 32 in total (London Councils, 2026), which limits the generalisability of the findings. In addition, because this is a qualitative study, the reliance on self-reported experiences potentially introduces subjectivity and bias in the responses.

Nevertheless, the findings are supported by quantitative studies. A survey of overcrowded households in England found that 77% of families experienced a decline in mental health, 32% reported increased family conflict and 53% reported feeling embarrassed about their overcrowded living conditions (National Housing Federation, 2023). Furthermore,

alongside mental well-being impacts, 76% of households reported physical health effects, including sleep deprivation and increased incidence of illness (National Housing Federation, 2023). However, the small sample size (n=207) may limit generalisability, the same as the qualitative study.

Further evidence to support the qualitative and quantitative studies is provided by Kulakiewicz (2022), who revealed that overcrowding in housing was associated with increased stress, alongside reduced feelings of control, which heightened negative well-being. Additionally, Lorentzen et al. (2022), through a systematic search on overcrowding and dwelling conditions, identified that mould was an increased occurrence due to high humidity levels. As discussed in section 4.1, mould exposure has significant implications for physical and mental well-being, therefore reinforcing the argument that overcrowding negatively impacts overall well-being and supporting the findings of Eveleigh et al. (2025).

4.3 Fire Safety

Fire safety in residential buildings affects well-being not only because there is potential for physical harm, but also through how safe residents feel within their home, as perceptions of safety are shaped by levels of trust, confidence, and perceived control over fire safety measures (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2025a). The Welsh Government (2024) conducted a mixed methods study to assess residents' fire safety knowledge, behaviours, and responses to fire risk, with the aim of informing future policy development. In this study, 24% of residents identified fire safety as a primary concern, and 15% reported that in the event of a fire, they were not confident that they could evacuate safely (Welsh Government, 2024). During residents' interviews, data showed that the residents who felt unsafe linked the feeling to factors such as inadequate escape routes, outdated fire safety systems, the building design, and behaviour of other residents, with some expressing anxiety around being trapped if a fire was occurring below them (Welsh Government, 2024). These findings suggest that fire safety perceptions can negatively impact well-being as they reduce a person's sense of security within their home.

However, despite the study being methodologically strong due to its large survey of residents (n=1,562) and the integration of qualitative and quantitative data, there are a few limitations to consider. As the study relies on self-reported perceptions, there is a chance of recall bias and potential over/under exaggeration of fire risk (Welsh Government, 2024). In addition, the study is cross-sectional, so it has only identified the association between fire safety perceptions and feelings of security; it cannot demonstrate that the perceptions directly cause poorer well-being (Welsh Government, 2024). Furthermore, the focus on residents in Wales may limit generalisability to student populations, whose housing conditions and exposure to fire safety information may differ.

There is evidence to support the findings of the Welsh Government (2024) research. The WHO Housing and Health Guidelines highlight that a healthy home should protect

residents from injury and ensure security, whilst also acknowledging that housing insecurity and unsafe conditions (such as inadequate escape routes) can be stressful and potentially damage well-being (World Health Organisation, 2018). Similarly, a qualitative study on Home Fire Safety Visits in England found that the Fire and Rescue Service consider fire protection as an integral part of public health and recognised that there are links between fire risk, mental health and social isolation (Hampton et al., 2025). Additionally, in the HHSRS Operating Guidance (2006), it states that if there is2 adequate means of escape, there is less chance that there will be severe harm, compared to a difficult escape. Collectively, these sources strengthen the argument that fire safety is not solely a regulatory concern; it's also about residents' well-being, which is significantly affected as they do not perceive their home environment to be safe.

4.4 Landlord/letting agency relationships with tenants

The relationship between landlords or letting agencies and tenants can be a significant determinant of housing-related well-being within the private rented sector (McKee and Harris, 2023). Research by Chisholm, Howden-Chapman and Fougere (2018) suggests that the relationship between tenants and landlords is unequal, as landlords have greater power over the tenants' well-being by controlling housing conditions and tenancy security, which limits tenants' motivation to request improvements or state their rights.

Furthermore, tenants were found to be reluctant to report issues within their homes due to the fear of eviction or a lack of awareness of their rights (Chisholm, Howden-Chapman and Fougere, 2018). However, the study by Chisholm, Howden-Chapman and Fougere (2018) draws on data from Australia, England, New Zealand and the United States, which may limit its applicability to Wales as there is an additional piece of legislation to protect tenants. In Wales, renters are protected from immediate eviction by the Renting Homes (Wales) Act 2016, which provides tenants with a minimum of a six-month notice period for 'no-fault' evictions (Citizens Advice, 2022). While this may improve tenants' confidence in reporting issues, limited awareness of this legislation may result in tenants continuing to be reluctant to report, and this can worsen stress and negatively impact mental well-being.

Qualitative research conducted in the UK further supports the relationship between power, housing conditions and well-being. Newton et al. (2022) found that poor quality housing, combined with limited tenant power, exacerbated feelings of stress, anxiety and other forms of mental ill-health, particularly during prolonged exposure such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants reported that they were reluctant to raise maintenance concerns with their landlords due to fear of retaliation in the form of rent increases or eviction, reinforcing the idea of a power imbalance in housing experiences (Newton et al., 2022). However, as this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is difficult to determine if the impacts were solely due to landlord behaviour, rather than the broader stressors associated with the pandemic.

Similarly, McKee and Harris (2023) conducted in-depth interviews with renters across the UK and found that landlord behaviour plays a role in shaping tenants' experiences within their homes. A landlord's unwillingness to carry out repairs was found to limit the tenants' enjoyment of their property and left them exposed to issues like damp, mould and physical hazards, which have recognised effects for mental and physical well-being as stated in section 4.1 (McKee and Harris, 2023). These findings support Newton et al. (2022) as both studies identified landlords' lack of care as the cause for poorer well-being amongst tenants. However, the generalisability of these findings may be limited by the small sample size (n=52), in comparison to the scale of the private rented sector in the UK, which in England alone was around 4.4 million in 2023 (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2025b).

Furthermore, a systematic review by Rolfe et al. (2022) examined how landlord-tenant relationships can impact tenants' ability to experience a property as a 'home'. The review found that landlords and letting agencies can either facilitate or hinder the sense of comfort, security and control that tenants have in their living environment. These factors were recognised as components that affect well-being, with their absence associated with increased stress and reduced well-being in tenants (Rolfe et al., 2022).

4.5 Gap Analysis

Existing research demonstrates that housing conditions can have an impact on health and well-being, and factors such as damp, overcrowding, fire safety, and housing insecurity link to both physical and mental health outcomes (World Health Organisation, 2018; Newton et al., 2022; Rolfe et al., 2022). However, the above research focuses on the general population, and the focus has been limited to students, despite their prevalence in the private rented sector (McKee and Harris, 2023).

Additionally, a lot of the literature tends to focus more on objective housing conditions and doesn't include subjective perceptions like safety and control (Hampton et al., 2025). There is qualitative research exploring these experiences, but they are not student-focused (Eveleigh et al., 2025).

Therefore, there is a gap in UK-based research to examine how students perceive their housing conditions and how it impacts their health and well-being.

5.0 Methodology

5.1 Introduction to Methodology

This study aimed to explore how CMU students perceive and experience the condition of their housing, and how these conditions influence their health and wellbeing. A qualitative approach was used because the study focuses on students lived experiences and personal views of their housing conditions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with CMU students on Microsoft Teams so they could be recorded and transcribed. Data was analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's framework.

5.2 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative design, as no existing data was available for CMU students' housing conditions. Qualitative research uses open-ended questions to explore the "how" and "why" of a research question (Tenny, Brannan and Brannan, 2022). It allows for a more detailed exploration of perspectives and experiences (Green and Thorogood, 2018). This approach was suitable because there was the potential for a wide range of issues to occur during interviews, from structural defects to landlord-related concerns.

Qualitative approaches are commonly used in housing quality research because many factors are subjective and are shaped by individual circumstances, making quantitative analysis more difficult (Holding et al., 2019).

5.3 Research Method

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. These interviews resemble a conversation while still aiming to gather information on a specific topic. Although an interview guide can be prepared, discussion can develop naturally depending on participant responses (Fylon, 2005).

Although 29 hazards are listed in the Housing Health and Safety Rating System Operating Guidance (HHSRS) (2006), not all hazards are relevant to every participant. Semi-structured interviews enabled additional issues to be explored alongside planned questions, improving the understanding of how hazards affected on participants' lives (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik, 2021). This method was preferred to structured interviews, where follow-up questions are limited and responses are often close ended (McLeod, 2024).

Interviews were arranged through Microsoft Outlook calendar invitations at times convenient to participants. They were held on Microsoft Teams and lasted approximately 20 minutes. Following consent, video and audio were recorded and transcribed using the built-in Teams feature. An interview guide containing open-ended questions asked participants to describe their housing conditions and impacts on wellbeing (available on

the accompanying Mahara profile). A list of HHSRS hazard profiles was also used as prompts where necessary. Topics discussed included coping strategies, housing quality, landlord relationships, fire safety, and accident prevention.

5.4 Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants from CMU. Purposive sampling involves intentionally selecting participants with characteristics or experience relevant to the study aim (Tajik, Golzar and Noor, 2024). Inclusion criteria required participants to be CMU students living in student housing. No criteria were set for age or gender. Students living at home were excluded, as their housing was not managed by student landlords or agencies.

This sampling method was appropriate because students living away from home were most likely to have relevant experiences. The final sample consisted of eight participants, as data saturation had been reached. Although 11 students initially volunteered, some later chose not to participate.

Sample sizes are often smaller in qualitative research due to the depth of analysis required. Purposive sampling can identify “information rich” participants who support more detailed analysis (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Data saturation refers to the stage at which no new themes or insights emerge, indicating that the research aim has been adequately explored (Ahmed, 2025).

5.5 Recruitment Process

Participants were recruited through university communication channels, including course page announcements and emails to CMU students. Interested students contacted the researcher by email after seeing these notices.

Before participation, students received a participant information sheet explaining the study, what participation involved, and that involvement was voluntary. This was important to ensure ethical practice and avoid pressure to participate. Transparency also helps build trust in research (UK Statistics Authority, 2022). After reading the information sheet, participants signed a consent form.

Participants could skip questions they were uncomfortable answering and could withdraw at any time before the data was anonymised. A conversational style was used during interviews to help participants feel comfortable.

5.6 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. This method identifies themes or patterns within interview transcripts (Ahmed et al., 2025). Braun and Clarke’s six-phase framework was followed: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes,

reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

To familiarise with the data, transcripts were read several times after transcription. Printed transcripts were manually highlighted to identify key ideas, recurring issues, and relevant quotations. Codes related to housing conditions (e.g. damp and mould), wellbeing, landlord relationships, and impacts on daily life were then grouped into broader themes. For example, damp and mould growth and excess cold were grouped under physiological hazards. Manual coding was appropriate for this dataset as it enabled close engagement with the data and reduced the risk of important details being overlooked by software (Isangula, Kelly and Wamoyi, 2024).

5.7 Ethical Considerations

This study gained ethical approval from CMU ethics committee (reference number: UG-11925). Ethical approval was necessary because the study involved human participants whose rights, safety, dignity, and wellbeing required protection (UK Research and Innovation, 2026).

Informed consent was obtained after participants had read the information sheet. Confidentiality was protected by removing identifiable information from transcripts and assigning numerical identifiers. Data was stored securely on a password-protected OneDrive account in accordance with Cardiff Metropolitan University's Research Ethics Policy.

6.0 Findings

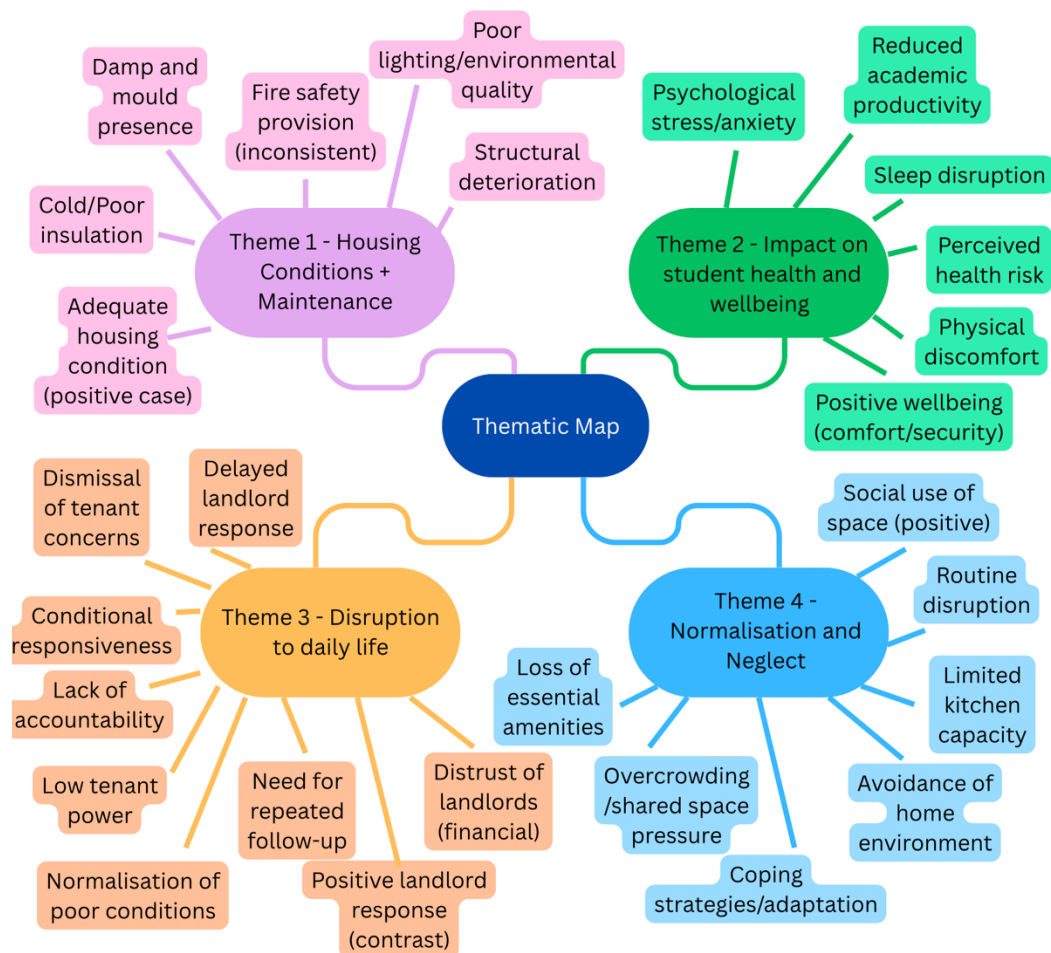


Figure 1: Thematic Map

6.1 Housing Conditions + Maintenance

Commonly reported housing conditions for this theme were damp, mould, cold temperatures and structural deterioration. The severity, however, differed considerably between participants.

Some severe conditions were reported by some participants. For example, Participant 1 (P1) said that mould was “covering the whole top of the roof” indicating extensive and possibly persistent problems. In contrast, Participant 7 (P7), described that in their house there was “a bit of mould”, which suggests that mould can also be a minor issue – albeit still noticeable. Similarly, Participant 8 (P8) said “there’s like mould in the bathtub...more damp” but did not seem bothered by it as much as it was just described as “not ideal”. The variation in responses suggests that damp and mould are widespread in student housing and fluctuates in intensity.

Cold housing conditions were also commonly reported, particularly by Participant 2 (P2) and P7. P7 said that “we heat, but it’s still pretty cold in the rooms”, while P2 stated that “if we don’t have the heating on all day...it’s really cold” and described physical discomfort in cold temperatures “my hands...start to hurt...I don’t want to move from my bed because it’s nice and warm”. P7 shared this feeling “the cold does affect my studying and productivity”. This indicates that heating doesn’t always counteract poor insulation.

Structural deterioration was an additional recurring issue. P8 described that “bannisters are loose...skirting boards come off” while Participant 4 (P4) also reported signs of wear and tear “there is some damp and peeling paint on the walls”. Although the issues seemed only minor to the participants, they reflect that maintenance is a concern in student housing.

Fire safety provision was another code that varied between participants. P8 had limited provision, stating that there were “only alarms downstairs”. Similarly, P4 said that “I don’t think we have any fire extinguishers or fire blankets” highlighting a lack of fire safety equipment in student private rented housing. In contrast, participants that lived in halls of residence described more comprehensive systems. For example, Participant 5 (P5) said that their accommodation “test (fire alarms) every Tuesday” and that they have “had three drills” so they were aware of fire assembly points, and Participant 6 (P6) said that they have access to “the fire blanket...the extinguisher” and that their accommodation “checked fire alarms”. The differences show that fire safety is inconsistent between different sectors of housing.

6.2 Impact on Student Health and Wellbeing

Housing conditions were found to have an influence on the physical and mental wellbeing of students, and the extent varied across the participants.

For some participants, stress and anxiety levels increased due to the issues with their housing. Participant 1 (P1) described feeling “panicked” due to a leak as “there’s a lot of electrical appliances in the kitchen”, which highlights safety concerns in the house. P1 acknowledged the health risk of mould and said that they avoided spending time in a room over concerns about “breathing it in”. This demonstrates the perceived risks influence behaviours.

Other participants described less severe impacts. P2 said that they have less motivation when they’re cold, responding “yeah” when asked the question. This indicates that even in houses that aren’t considered as bad as others, the issues can still impact academic performance.

Sleep disruption was a very popular with 25% of participants identifying it as an issue. P4 described being woken up by disturbances “I’ve woken up to loud crashes”, while P6 said sleep disruption has an impact on them throughout the day “If she’s still being really loud at

two...it affects my sleep". For P5, it was less about noise disruption and more about the comfort of the bed, saying "sometimes...I'm tossing and trying to get comfortable" when they were asked to describe how their life was affected.

In contrast, participants in higher-quality housing/accommodation reported having more positive experiences. P3 said that the comfort of their house "has a positive effect on mental health", and while P5 did report sleep disruption, they also said "being able to go out and socialise (with flatmates) ...has definitely helped", highlighting the benefits of having a supportive living environment. Similarly, P6 also had sleep disruption but when asked to describe their experience overall said that "it's honestly been fine for me", indicating that they felt sleep had a minimal negative impact on them.

6.3 Disruption to Daily Life

Housing conditions were also revealed to impact students' daily routines, particularly in terms of accessing facilities and shared spaces.

In some of the worst cases, participants experienced a loss of essential amenities. P1 reported that they lost the use of their shower due to a crack and said, "none of us were showering in it" and that they were having use friends' facilities instead, demonstrating how unresolved maintenance issues prevent access to basic amenities. They were also worried that water would start "gushing down from the ceiling again" which would mean another maintenance report to file.

Additionally, overcrowding and space limitation were also common issues mentioned with more than 60% of participants listing it as an issue. P5 described their shared kitchen as being "a bit crowded...between seven people", and P8 stated that in their kitchen "about four people can cook...quite tight" and they live in a house of seven people, meaning that when somebody wants to eat, they may not have the facilities to cook. Similarly, P6 states that not every person in their house would be able to use appliances at the same time "same time, probably not". These statements indicate that shared spaces seemingly have limited capacity despite having numerous bedrooms.

Participants also mentioned that they had to adapt their routines due challenges that arose. For example, P7 must use a "heated blanket" to cope with cold conditions and said "I always make sure to heat it" implying that the cold is an ongoing issue within their property. P6 described having to listen to music to "block that out" referring to the noise outside their window and would "knock on the wall" of the person in the room next to them if they're being loud at nighttime. In contrast, P2 said that at they choose to avoid their home altogether and actually prefer it, replying "yeah, probably" when asked if they prefer to be out of the house and they stay out of the house most of the day "for like 5 days of the week" due to the poor conditions of their home. These examples show that coping strategies range from adaptation to avoidance.

However, not all experiences were negative. P3 described their shared spaces positively, saying that the good conditions of their house made them “more likely to spend time cooking...or in shared spaces” and that they spend time “socialising” (with housemates). This suggests that housing conditions also have an impact on daily activities and can facilitate social interaction.

6.4 Neglect + Normalisation

One of the key themes across all the participants was how they perceived landlord neglect and how they chose to normalise poor housing conditions.

Many reported that when they would request maintenance support there would be a delay in a response and would sometimes need to repeatedly follow up with their letting agency and landlord to get them to acknowledge the maintenance report. P8 stated they must “keep chasing them up” (referring to their letting agency), while P1 had a similar issue and described having to wait for long periods before hearing back “maybe like a week would go by and then they do respond”. P7 also stated that their landlord “might act on it in a month” if they report a maintenance issue, signifying a lack of urgency. They also said they think the reason behind the delay is because “he’s not bothered because we’re students” implying that they think students are perceived as a population that are exploited.

In some cases, participants said they felt as though their concerns were dismissed. P2 said that their letting agency outright said, “sounds like a you problem”, essentially pushing the responsibility of the issue onto the tenant suggesting a sense of limited help. To even get their issues addressed, P8 said “if we push...they will come and fix it” but expressed a concern that the letting agency were “going to try and say we’ve made these issues” which shows a distrust in their letting agency as they think their deposits will be retained. This demonstrates the sense of limited tenant power. Additionally, P1 expressed their letting agency as being indifferent “they just don’t seem too bothered” further indicating a lack of trust in letting agencies and landlords.

A lot of the conditions were often normalised. P1 said “it’s expected that student houses are like this, while P7 suggested some issues were unavoidable “unless you’re paying like 900 a month”. Additionally, P8 downplayed the structural issues of their house, labelling them as “wear and tear”. This normalisation of issues that should be getting resolved may reduce the likelihood of maintenance reporting and the challenging of negative conditions.

However, not all participants had negative relationships with their landlords and letting agency. Those in halls of residence had positive experiences. P5 said their maintenance issues were solved “within the following day”, and P6 described the accommodation staff as “lovely” and that nothing was “a problem” to them. This highlights the differences in the management of private rented houses and halls of residence.

7.0 Discussion

7.1 Damp, Mould and Cold and Wellbeing

From the findings it can be determined that damp, mould and cold are important concerns within student housing. Participants such as P1, P2, P7 and P8 all reported either having damp, mould, condensation, cold indoor temperatures or a combination. P1 described having mould “covering the whole top of the roof” and said that it negatively influenced their comfort, whilst P7 and P2 both described needing to have the heating on all day to minimise the effect of their cold houses, which implies that rather than reporting the issue to their landlords or letting agency, they would rather try and find alternative ways cope. This suggests that students are avoiding reporting issues. These findings support research that identifies damp and mould as conditions that cause detrimental outcomes such as stress, depression and poor overall health and wellbeing (Brooks et al., 2023). Additionally, P1 said that “just the gravity of the mould, you wouldn’t want to be looking up (at the mould) in bed” which supports what Brooks et al. (2023) reveals about mould eliciting negative feelings from the sight.

Additionally, the findings suggest that not only can these conditions affect physical discomfort, but they can also affect actual health too. P1 expressed a concern about “breathing in” the mould and said that they don’t want to be in the room affected. This indicates that mould causes worry among tenants which can lead to a decline in mental health, supporting Reis, Gaspar de Matos and Ramiro (2019) as they found that worrying can affect mental health. Similarly, P7 said that the cold conditions of their house reduced their ability to study and affected their productivity. A study by Vimalanathan and Ramesh Babu (2014) found temperature influenced worker performance and colder temperatures negatively affected their performance, suggesting cold houses may reduce the productivity of students working from home.

However, some participants (P3, P5 and P6) reported having little to no damp or mould in their home and that it wasn’t cold suggesting that student housing conditions are not universal. Instead, research has found that housing experiences are more uneven than universal as affordability, student background and accessibility of suitable accommodation are factors that can impact the condition of a student house (Sotomayor et al., 2022). Therefore, it appears that student opportunities for high quality housing are unequal.

7.2 Student Health and Wellbeing

For some participants the impact that their house had on their wellbeing was severe. P1 described that they were “panicking” as they had a leak that was very close to electrical appliances in their kitchen, which demonstrates that disrepair in a house can cause psychological stress. This is supported by results from a study conducted by Burdette, Hill

and Hale (2011) that found a positive association between psychological stress and a house being in disrepair (leaky structures, bad plumbing etc.).

Other participants linked the temperature of their house to reduced academic motivation. P2 expressed that they “didn’t want to move from their bed because it’s nice and warm” and that if they were sat at their desk their “hands start to hurt” from the cold temperatures. Feeling discomfort due to a cold house is likely to hinder motivation. A study by Kirkil (2025) found that higher thermal temperatures in a university classroom improved exam results and increased motivation to learn. This implies that having a warm house can incentivise students to study.

Sleep disruption was another issue that emerged in the findings, with P4 and P6 both being woken up and kept awake by noise. P6 expressed that they were affected negatively the following day if their sleep was disrupted. Existing literature links poor sleep with elevated stress levels and reduced daily functioning (Barber, Rackoff and Newman, 2023). This reinforces the idea that students’ homes need to be a place of rest as well as shelter.

In contrast, P3 and P5’s accommodation had a positive effect on their health and wellbeing, describing it as being comfortable and secure. P3 explicitly stated that they felt their house “has a positive effect on mental health”. This challenges the current narrative that housing only seems to have a negative effect on mental health. The findings suggest that high-quality housing can promote wellbeing by be comfortable and secure, which is supported by Bentley et al. (2025) that state that housing can either shield health or increase threats to health which is subject to the quality of it and the condition it’s in.

7.3 Overcrowding and Disruption to Daily Life

In the findings, it is apparent that overcrowding was experienced through small, shared facilities rather than through inadequate rooms per person in the house. P1 said that in their house there is one bathroom for four people, while P5 and P8 said that if all their housemates tried to cook at the same time, the kitchen would become too crowded and P6 said there were not enough appliances to be cooking simultaneously. The HHSRS Operating Guidance (2006) says that “small kitchens increase the risk of accidents” and as there isn’t enough room for participants to safely use the facilities of their house, the risk for them increases exponentially.

The findings also support research that suggests overcrowding can amplify conflict, lessen privacy and create stress through competing for resources (Kearns, 2022). In this study, overcrowding is referring to limited access to facilities. This suggests that overcrowding isn’t just about room numbers, it’s about space available to live in the property with full use of facilities.

The impact on wellbeing was evident in the participants that that experienced disruption in their lives. Some participants changed their routines and avoided shared spaces at busy

times. P2 said that they spent “5 days a week” out of the house, which may be because they were uncomfortable with the space in their house. This suggests that pressures such as limited space can change habits and reduce connection to the home.

However, not every participant felt that there wasn’t enough space in their house. P3 said that they enjoyed spending time in shared spaces, which contradicts assumptions that student housing has limited space and causes stress. There is evidence to suggest that student accommodation/housing is a space that friendships can develop in and the social connection experienced leads to positive wellbeing (Worsley, Harrison and Corcoran, 2021). Therefore, it can be determined that overcrowding is both a physical issue and a social issue.

7.4 Fire Safety

Fire safety was a commonly mentioned issue with housing. Private rented housing participants, specifically P4 and P8, stated that they had either limited or no equipment and that alarms were missing throughout their houses. This is compared to participants that lived in halls of residence, such as P5 and P6, that had regular fire drills “every Tuesday” and had regular equipment checks to make sure they worked.

These findings are important because smoke alarms and safety measures are basic expectations of housing that is suitable for human habitation (Welsh Government, 2022). This suggests from the findings that some student houses are below expected standards and are compromising the safety of the students in them.

However, not all private rented housing was found to be lacking in fire safety measures. P7 said that their landlord provided the house with a fire extinguisher, fire blanket and smoke alarms. This suggests that the divide isn’t just halls of residence are good and private sector housing is bad, it’s about there being consistency within management of a property and keeping the standards where they should be.

7.5 Landlord and Letting Agency Practices, and the Normalisation of Conditions

Landlord and letting agency behaviour was one of the most emphasised issues by participants. Students in private sector housing reported that there were frequent delays in maintenance, poor communication and a consistent need to keep messaging their property manager to remind them that there were outstanding repairs. P8 had to “keep chasing up” their landlord and P7 said repairs could take about a month. P2 states that when they reported issues to their letting agency, they were very dismissive, indicating a lack of support for students.

These responses from participants support literature in saying the way a landlord or letting agency operate can shape tenants’ wellbeing as they can either facilitate safety and

satisfaction or inhibit wellbeing by making tenants' feel like they have no control over their living situation (McKee and Harris, 2023). When issues remain unsolved, tenants in private sector housing may experience elevated stress levels, not only because they're living in a property with a defect, but because they will feel powerless and fear what the landlord will do if they keep pursuing the maintenance (Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, 2018). This was also reflected by P1, that said that their landlord didn't seem bothered when they requested maintenance.

A unique finding was the normalisation of bad conditions. P1 stated that they think poor conditions are "expected" in student properties and P7 said that unless they paid significantly higher rent, mould would be unavoidable. These thoughts are supported by research that links private rented sector affordability to poorer conditions (Lister, 2006).

Not every participant had negative experiences with their housing management. P5 and P6 had positive experiences which complicates the assumption that all student housing providers ignore students concerns. These participants described a positive relationship with the management and said that nothing was too much of an issue to fix, suggesting that a responsible team can minimise negative wellbeing implications.

7.6 Strengths, Limitations and Transferability

A strength of this study is the use of semi structured interviews, as they produced comprehensive accounts of various housing experiences the different health and wellbeing impacts that arise with and without issues. There are participants from both halls of residence which are managed by an institution and private sector housing which are managed by a landlord or letting agency, so it enabled a contrast between the two.

However, the sample size is small and is limited to one university which reduces external validity. As purposive sampling was used, there is also the potential for selection bias. As the data was self-reported in the interviews, the internal validity may be affected as participants would have different interpretations or could have omitted relevant details. Limitations of online interviews include unstable connections from technology, poor audio quality, the participant being unable to build trust with the interviewer and the limited observation of body language (Anthony et al., 2025).

Regardless of this, the findings are likely transferable to similar UK housing contexts that involve student housing. In qualitative research, clear appropriate descriptions will improve transferability as it will allow readers to decide whether the findings apply in other settings (Nowell et al., 2017).

8.0 Conclusion

This study explored how the conditions of student housing influence health and wellbeing. In the findings, it is demonstrated that the quality of housing has a significant impact on students' comfort, mental wellbeing, academic performance and daily routines. Some participants in halls of residence had more positive experiences than negative, whilst many participants in private rented houses had more negative experiences than positive. With the most prevalent issues being damp, mould, cold temperatures, overcrowding, inadequate fire safety provisions and a delayed maintenance response.

A key finding from this research is that student housing quality isn't poor, its uneven. Students living in accommodation that was managed to a higher standard reporting feelings such as comfort, security and an overall positive wellbeing, while students living in poorly managed accommodation experienced stress, discomfort, disturbed sleep, and reduced productivity. When the two are compared, it suggests that accommodation type and how it is managed are factors that influence student wellbeing.

Another important finding is how influential landlord behaviour can be. Participants that had delayed maintenance responses, received poor communication or needed to "chase" their landlords, reported how they felt powerless and stressed. In comparison to students that lived in accommodation with management that were more than happy to respond to any requests made of them. Quality housing management therefore seems to be essential to minimise the negative wellbeing impacts.

Based on the findings, there are a few recommendations that can be made. First, universities should have clearer support services for students that are renting, including assistance on what their rights as tenants are, and how they can access wellbeing support if they feel as though they need it. Second, landlords and letting agencies need to ensure that they are responding to maintenance requests in a timelier manner, especially when the issues involve hazards that lead to significant safety concerns, such as a lack of fire safety equipment.

Future research in this area should explore the housing conditions students experience across multiple universities and geographical areas to see if there are patterns. Additionally, research could look at longer-term impacts on students that live in poor quality housing to see if affects academic attainment overall.

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