

# Student Living Report

Setting the Vision for Student Housing Across Lothian Region



# Introduction

**From the four Principals of the University of Edinburgh, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh Napier University and Queen Margaret University**

Edinburgh is a vibrant, modern capital city that attracts a diverse mix of citizens to live, work, study and visit. It is a city synonymous with learning with four world-class universities based in and around Scotland's capital.

More and more people are attracted to the city annually with a growth of more than ten percent in residents between 2011-2021 and we welcome more than four million visitors annually. Every year, more than 62,660 students including 23,925 international students come to Edinburgh to continue their education at our institutions.

The purpose of this document is to highlight the benefit universities bring to the region and the housing support institutions provide to their students. It will also recognise the combined pressures on housing across the city and how we can work collaboratively to maintain Edinburgh as a dynamic and welcoming location for citizens and visitors.





# Executive Summary

- Edinburgh and the Lothians are, and continue to be, a very attractive location for students wishing to continue into higher education, as evidenced by the growth of numbers of students since 2012. However, 2024/25 did see some stabilisation of overall enrolment numbers
- The start of the 2024/25 academic year saw occupancy of between 95% - 99.5% in university operated housing, with no return to the housing issues of 2022
- While approximately 36,500 students will live in their parental/own home or Purpose-Built Student Accommodation (PBSA), an estimate of 27,000, largely later year students, are trying to secure housing in the Private Rented Tenancy (PRT) sector
- The growth of privately operated student housing has seen a massive increase in accommodation at the highest rent levels, namely ensuite rooms and studio apartments, costing, on average £12,500 per year.
- Local Development Plans which includes housing needs, are underway in the shape of City Plan 2040
- Draft guidance around planning for Purpose-Built Student Accommodation is currently under consultation
- University-owned housing is generally less expensive than private PBSA, due to favourable terms such as type, such budget-friendly room types, e.g. twins and non-ensuite, and shorter lease lengths
- During 2025 several geo-political risks to the sector have arisen in the shape of potential immigration policy, changes to housing legislation, the proposed Building Safety Levy and global trade insecurities
- Based on the current projections, no growth is planned by universities but there is still a requirement for new student housing to ease demand pressure on private rented tenancies
- In light of on-going turbulence, Cushman and Wakefield have been commissioned to undertake a review of all market conditions and future projections



## Why students select Edinburgh and what they bring to the city

- Edinburgh is a beautiful, historic city which has regularly been voted as one of the most desirable places to live in the world. Large enough to offer something for everyone, but small enough to feel like home, it is a modern, sophisticated and beautiful European city with a diverse, multicultural community.
- Home to a UNESCO World Heritage Site, our city mixes architectural beauty and history with a lively, fun environment. It offers an exciting array of entertainment, history, culture and sport, with the lush Scottish countryside and coastline just a few miles away. It is a safe and prosperous city, with an abundance of parks and green spaces for recreation and reflection.
- The city centre also plays host to a carnival atmosphere every August, when the world-famous Edinburgh Festival takes over the town and there is a year-round calendar of events.
- Over 62,000 students call Edinburgh home, adding to the city's unique and culturally diverse buzz.
- It's a great city to graduate from with high graduate outcomes and was recognised as an Innovation Hub by Knight Frank, with a burgeoning start up community. *Liberty Living* estimate that 51% of our students make Edinburgh their permanent home, beyond their period of study.
- The Edinburgh Chamber of Commerce, of which the universities are members, aspires to promote an Inspired, Connected, Fair, Thriving city through its 'Edinburgh City Vision 2050'.
- Universities and the people who study here embody our civic responsibilities, through ground-breaking research, providing services, volunteering in our communities and the provision of grants to support local organisations.
- Last year, Universities UK reported international students boost the UK economy by £41.9 billion annually. A report from London Economics on the impact of the University of Edinburgh revealed that for every one pound spent by the university, there is seven pounds of economic benefit.
- In addition, universities are large employers, supporting the local economy to thrive.





# Universities add value to the wider city region

## Universities do not operate in isolation and contribute to civic society and the local economy in a range of different ways

- We work with partners and government bodies on a local, regional and national level, to deliver Net Zero initiatives and inform policy decisions through our research
- Our students undertake a wealth of volunteering programmes to the benefit of our communities, be that tutoring in local schools or gorilla gardening
- In terms of being service users and as training grounds for students from medical and other disciplines, we are important contributors to healthcare services
- Jobs are created within universities and within supporting organisations, at all levels, and our students often take on employment during their studies as well as becoming longer-term residents who contribute to the economy
- We work closely with local industry including through procurement of goods and services and we also have strong civic connections through our roles as anchor institutions
- Our staff and students stimulate the local economy through retail and service industry spending
- Talent generation both in terms of graduate recruitment and innovation within the city
- Collaboration in securing city region deal funding



# Growth of universities in the region over time

Edinburgh full-time student numbers growth overtime

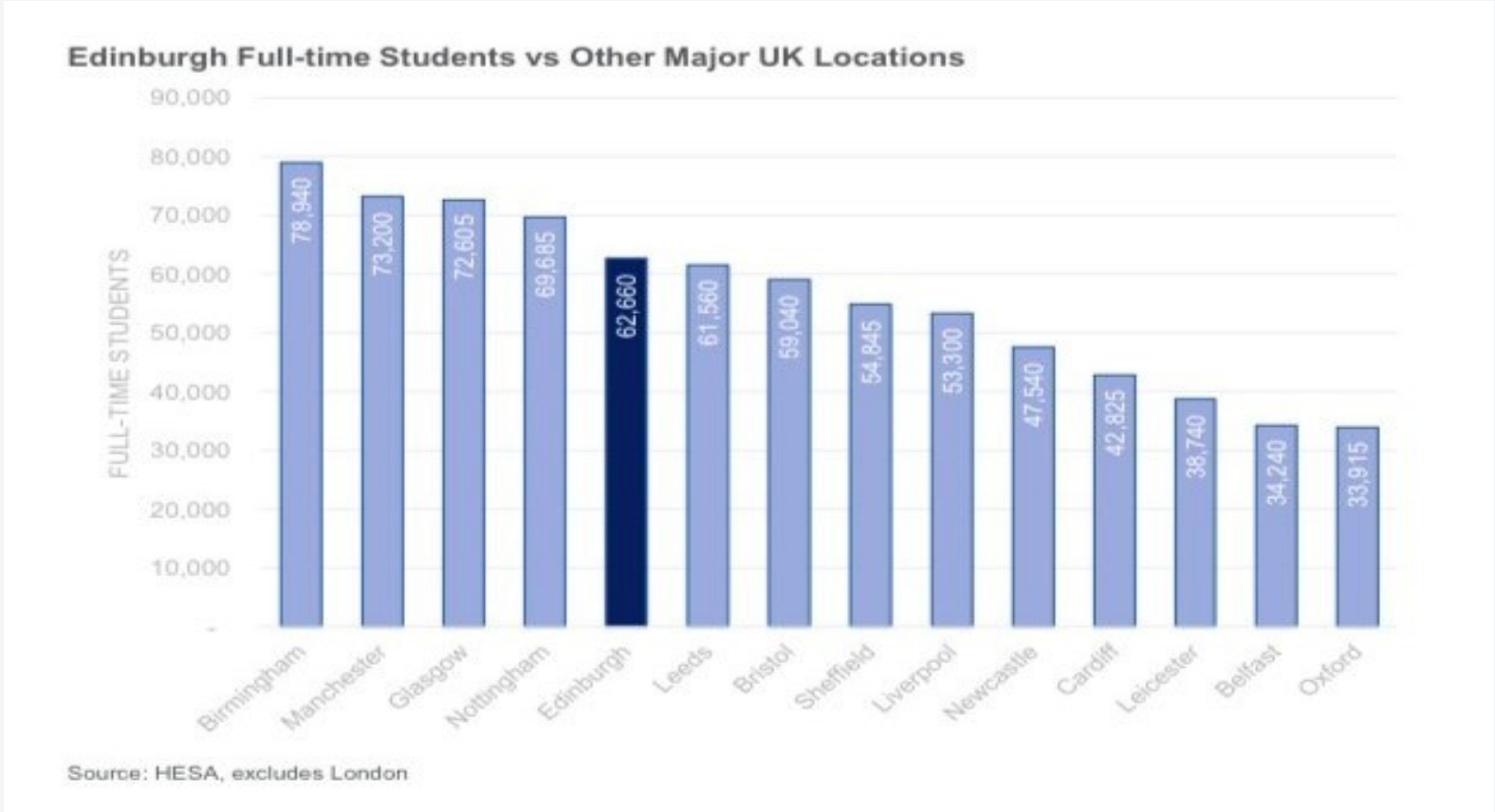


Edinburgh has the seventh largest population of full-time students in the UK. The city is home to 62,660 full-time students in 2021/22 across the four main institutions: University of Edinburgh, Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh Napier University and Queen Margaret University (excluding those taught off-site, distance learners and those being taught at partner institutions). The population has grown 36.18% or 16,645 students since 2012. These figures will be updated during 2025





# Numbers of students compared to other University cities



Edinburgh, being home to four Higher Education Providers, is ranked 7<sup>th</sup> in the UK in relation to the number of students living in the city

# The commitments universities make to students who select Edinburgh as their place to study

- All institutions offer some form of guarantee of housing, largely aimed at full-time students, studying in the region for the first time
- A small volume of housing is also provided for students falling outside this guarantee, be that later year students, care experienced students or those with medical support requirements

In accommodating these students, we commit to providing:

- Safe and pleasant housing to support academic endeavours
- Clean, well maintained, and secure living accommodation for all our residents with all the necessary facilities to assist with everyday living
- Housing which meets stringent health and safety requirements to meet all licensing, habitation and repairing standards
- A framework of Occupancy Agreements and Codes of Conducts to ensure we are respectful to each other and the neighbourhoods in which we live
- A range of accessible housing for students with disabilities or extra support needs
- A range of resources to help ease the transition to university and develop skills to enable success personally, socially and academically
- Encouragement to engage in our local communities and to positively impact our local neighbours and businesses
- Awareness of university provision of student support services and how to access them
- Signposting to services for students who are experiencing health or wellbeing issues, which include encouraging students to access relevant support services.
- Sustainable student accommodation and ensuring residents are informed of their options for recycling of waste and to ensure these waste areas are clean and well maintained.







# The make-up of student housing and its impact on the city

The provision of student housing in the region is a mixed tenure model, comprising of a blend of the following groups:

- Institution operated housing (either owned or leased) – largely used to accommodate students falling inside of a housing guarantee. This is specific to each institution and a range of support services is available to aid the transition to university. There are currently in the region of 13,900 beds of this type in the region:

University of Edinburgh: 9,828 beds  
Edinburgh Napier University: 1,240 beds  
Heriot-Watt University: 2,050 beds  
Queen Margaret University: 800 beds

- Privately-operated, Purpose-Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) – these are blocks of student housing, operated independently of any single institution. Institutions may however select to work with PBSAs to deliver their housing commitments. These are relatively new to the student housing market and have grown significantly in the last two decades. Housing of the nature is symbiotic with Higher Education as it provides good quality, purpose built accommodation without drawing down on institutional capital. There are **10,650** beds of this nature in the city of Edinburgh.
- Private Rented Tenancies – This has traditionally been the nature of housing utilised by later year undergraduate and postgraduate students however, this market has contracted significantly, post-pandemic. With the growth of the city, housing of this type is subject to high demand from families and the broader community. The numbers of beds of this type vary from month to month, however, research undertaken by Cushman & Wakefield in 2020/21 estimated that up to **27,000** students are seeking housing of this nature but these figures are currently being updated to capture market changes.
- Typically, 12,000 students reside in family/own home and travel to campus but this figure will be revisited in relation to the 2025/26 intake data.





# Where our students live

## University-operated Housing



The combined universities operate 13,900 beds across the region, with University of Edinburgh operating the majority. Institutions will also have agreements with privately operated PBSA to place students in their housing.

These beds are near each centre of teaching, with concentrations around each particular campus.

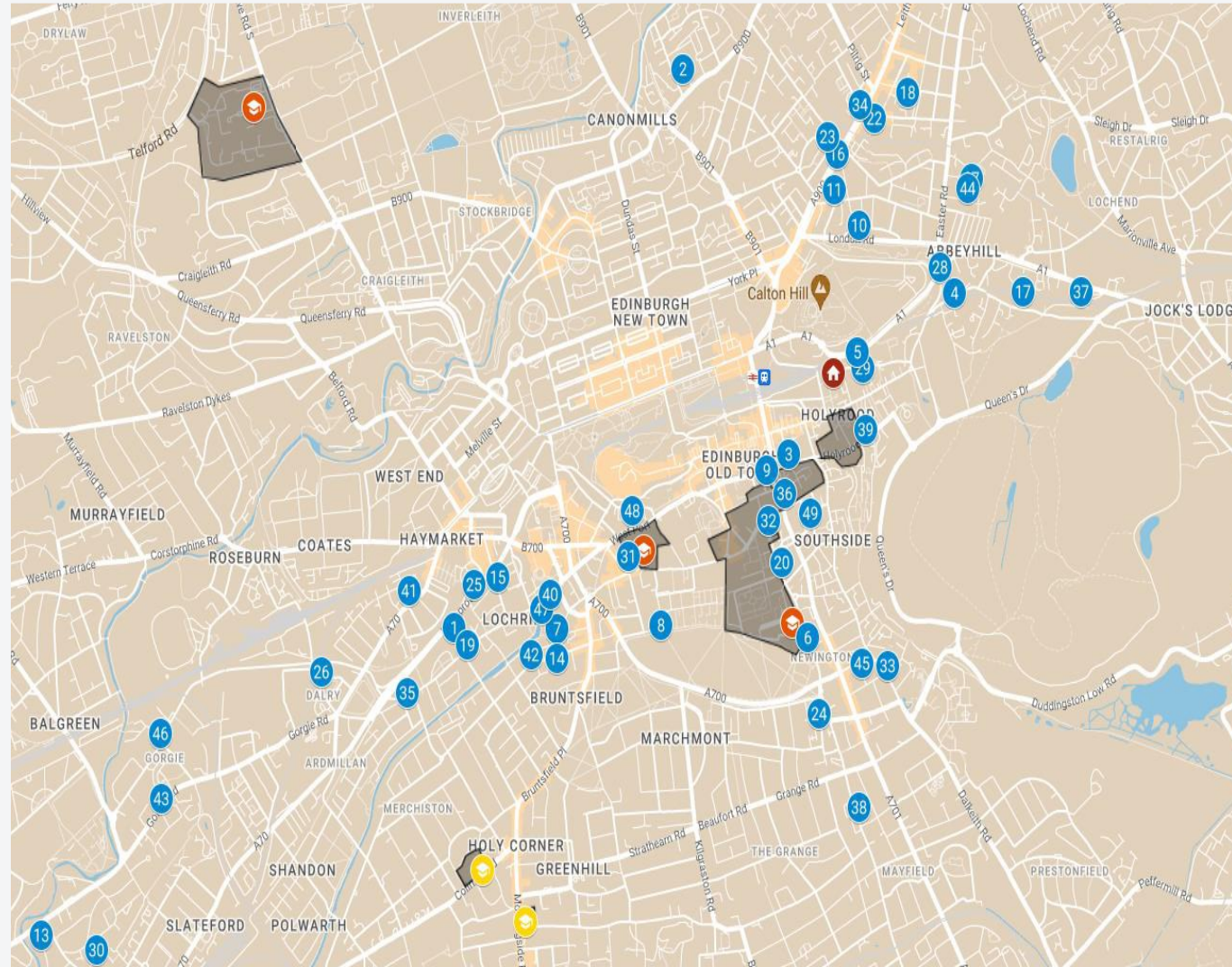
These beds tend to be at the lower end of the cost spectrum with twin rooms and non-ensuite being commonplace





# Where do our students live

## Privately-operated Purpose-Built Student Housing (PBSA)



Privately owned and operated PBSA schemes make up 10,650 beds in the city, with several new sites in the pipeline. These developments are dispersed across Edinburgh, with the majority being found in the City Centre, Newington, Haymarket/Fountainbridge, South of the City Centre and Slateford.

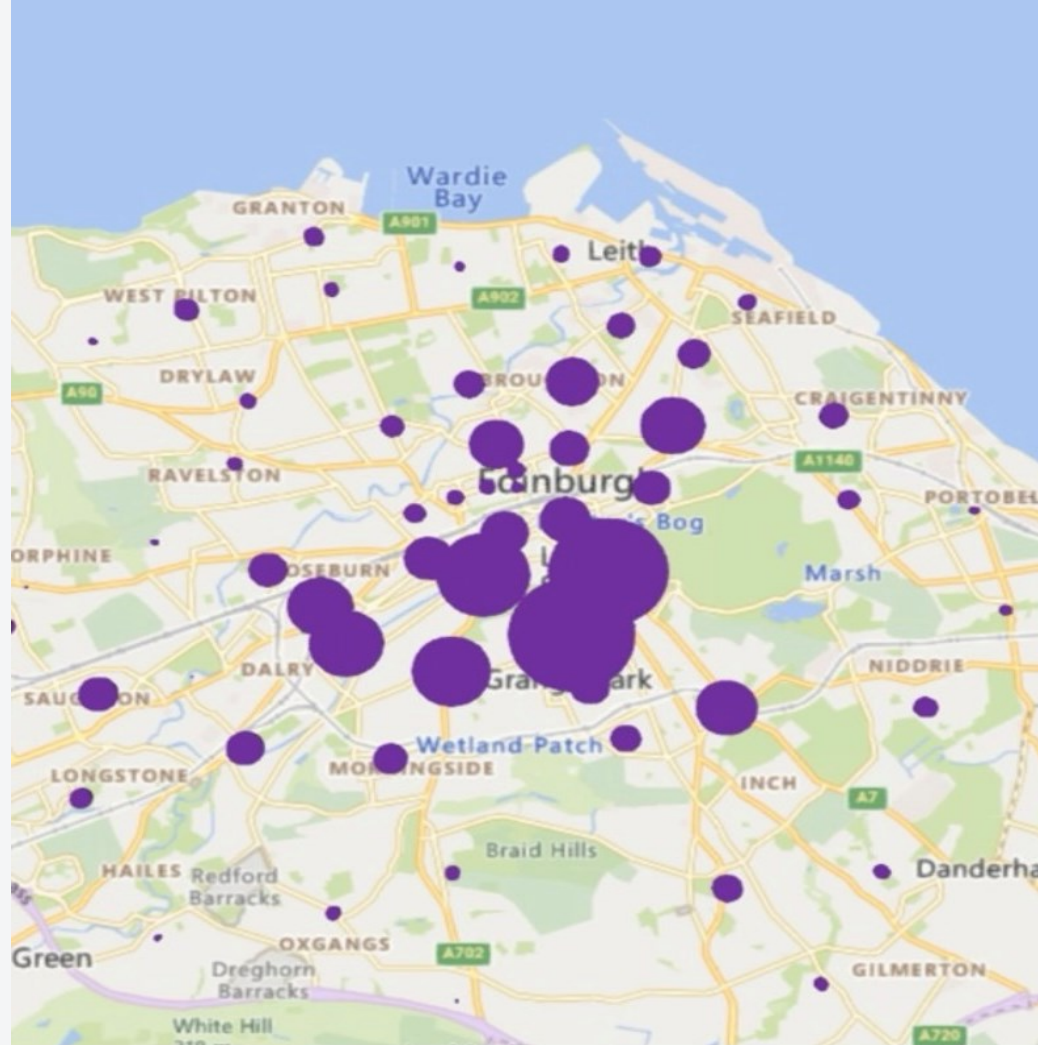
In terms of concentration, the Abbeyhill and Newington areas provide 3,300 beds across several schemes, closely followed by Haymarket and Fountainbridge with over 3,000 beds. The City Centre is a popular area, but restricted development has led to more schemes in the outer city.





# Where our students live

## Private rented tenancies



In 2021/22, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) reported an approximate of 20,165 students residing in the Private Rented Sector, including Houses in Multiple Occupancy (HMOs) smaller shared houses and Built to Rent type accommodation. Taking the scale of alternative housing into account, the true number is believed to be closed to 27,000\*.

Three postcode areas, spanning Newington, Bruntsfield, and Fountainbridge are home to a over a third of all students reporting to living in this type of housing (37%). Other popular areas are EH11 and EH10 adjacent to the Edinburgh Napier Murchison Campus.

In line with other Scottish cities, Edinburgh has mandatory licensing for HMOs inhabited by three or more individuals.

\* This figure is currently under review





# Where our students live

## Private rented tenancies – the changing landscape

The Houses in Multiple Occupancy (HMOs) have historically played a vital role in Edinburgh's private rented sector, offering an essential source of affordable accommodation, especially for students transitioning from university-provided accommodation. However, recent years have seen declining availability of private rented properties, even as the number of students seeking rental housing has risen (growing by 33% between 2017/18 and 2021/22).

This decline, amounting to a 23% drop in available properties over six years, reflects a mismatch between growing demand and diminishing supply, creating challenges for tenants in accessing suitable housing options.

The repercussions of this decline in HMO availability are far-reaching, particularly for students who rely on these properties for affordable housing. With fewer options available, students may face heightened competition for rental properties, potentially leading to increased rental prices and decreased living standards for those unable to secure suitable accommodation. Moreover, the broader implications extend to the local community, as the reduction in HMO stock may strain the overall rental market, affecting housing affordability and accessibility for various demographic groups.



## How students are supported while living here

- All institutions across the city provide outstanding support to assist students in their transition to university life, primarily through:
  - **Activities:** we promote social cohesion, individual wellness and growth
  - **Advice:** we are here to listen, support and suggest a way forward
  - **Access:** we provide signposting to available services within and external to our institutions
- There are also a wealth of Wellbeing Services offered by each institution
- Universities also provide access to a range of supplementary services such as Student Counselling, Sports and Societies



# How students are supported while living here

For students facing circumstances which may present a barrier to academic pursuit, specific support programmes are in place, beyond our Residence Life Programmes

- Widening Participation (WP) is a core aim for institutions across the city as it recognises that not everyone has the same start in life nor the same opportunities to flourish and succeed educationally. WP aims to address these educational inequalities and patterns of under-representation in universities. It recognises how transformative a university degree can be for the individual and more widely its impact on social mobility within our society. WP works to raise aspiration towards HE and offer support to remove those obstacles. So that individuals, regardless of their background, can make informed choices about their future, built on their own ambitions and potential and fully pursue them.
- Institutions are committed to supporting a variety of students who may encounter specific barriers around joining the university community, inclusive of Care experience students, those estranged from their families and students who are primary carers. Support can take the shape of financial assistance, provision of university housing and a myriad of wellbeing services such as staff and peer mentoring.
- Commitment to housing students with physical disabilities – accommodation of this type is in exceptionally short supply in both private and local authorities housing stock.
- The University of Edinburgh and Heriot Watt University also provide a rent guarantor scheme where the institution will act as a rent guarantor to help students secure accommodation which may be unavailable to them because a UK-based rent guarantor is required.





# How universities contribute to sustainable, well connected neighbourhoods, for all our citizens

Each University has a climate strategy and a 'net zero' goal to eliminate the use of fossil fuels where possible and each institution is master planning to provide a long-term framework for coordinating investment in sustainable and resilient low carbon buildings and infrastructure across their estates. This is for both new buildings and also the existing estate. The initiatives being developed need to be scalable, replicable, maximise long-term benefit as well as aligning affordability with the pace and scale of delivery required to achieve strategic objectives. This is a complex and unprecedented journey requiring innovation, collaboration, and a considered approach.

Universities engage closely with the City of Edinburgh Council, government, regional utilities infrastructure and private and public sector partners through participation in the City of Edinburgh Net Zero Leadership Board and related partnership groups. These forums bring together regional stakeholders to collaborate and provide leadership on strategies related to heat decarbonisation, sustainable construction, building refurbishment, energy master planning and also to explore any place based opportunities.

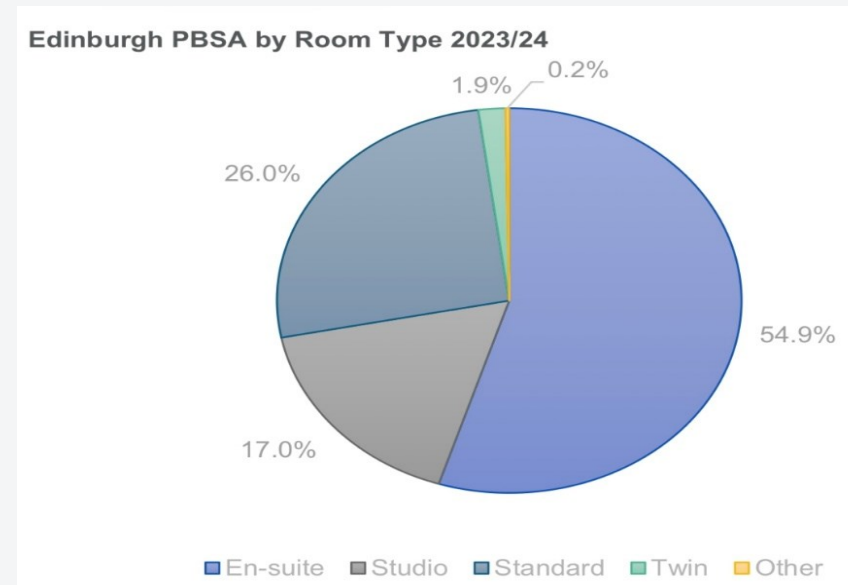
The universities are engaging with local authorities and transport providers to produce travel and transport plans that align to local and national aspirations. These plans, which are heavily influenced by a need to move to a net zero transport network, are looking to support high quality public transport options, a reduction in car use, better facilities and infrastructure and to encourage active travel amongst staff and students.





# The type of student housing available in the region

Research undertaken by Cushman and Wakefield, commissioned by all four universities, has highlighted the nature of student housing in the PBSA market where rooms are leased to student directly.



Source: Cushman & Wakefield

The chart shows that 71% of available stock, mainly private PBSA, comprises higher-rent studios and ensuites. University housing, by contrast, offers more affordable, shorter-lease options closer to campus.



# Current funding models to assist with living costs\*

**Student funding models vary across each of the four nations, in the United Kingdom but taking the Scottish model as an example:**

Scottish domiciled students studying at a Scottish university are entitled to apply for a package of bursary and loan support, based on household income. Support includes:

- a non-income assessed student loan of £5,100 a year for all students.
- a £11,400 package for care experienced students, inclusive of fees, bursary and loans.
- a loan of up to £10,000 (comprising £5,500 for fees and £4,500 for living costs) for any taught or research postgraduate course at any Scottish Higher Education Institute up to full Masters level.
- continued support for disabled students through the Disabled Student Allowance (DSA).
- living cost grants for certain categories of students such as lone parents and those with dependants.

Students who require additional support on top of this can apply for Discretionary Funds. These funds are intended to provide assistance e.g. with housing or travel costs, for students who experience financial difficulty accessing or remaining in further or higher education. They are allocated by Scottish Ministers and administered by individual colleges and universities.

\* These figures reflect the retrospective funding position at the point the data on rents was collected





# Targeted Financial Support that is available

Each Institution will have mechanisms to support students with the greatest financial need. Details of such arrangements can be found through the links below:

[University financial support | The University of Edinburgh](#)

[Financial support: Scottish students \(Undergraduate\) \(napier.ac.uk\)](#)

[International students fees and funding](#)

[Financial support - Heriot-Watt University \(hw.ac.uk\)](#)

[Student Funding Service | Study Here | Queen Margaret University \(qmu.ac.uk\)](#)



# The future picture for the Student Housing sector

There are a broad spectrum of factors impacting both the supply and demand for student housing:

- Introduction of Short-term lets licensing scheme - the impact of which remains to be seen.
- Local Development Plan *City Plan 2030* was published on 5 April 2024; however, *City Plan 2040* is now underway
- The Scottish Government's review of Purpose Built Student Accommodation and how it dovetails with the Housing Bill continues to progress through Holyrood, with potentially far reaching consequences for the sector.
- Continued geo-political pressures round Graduate route visas and proposed levies on International student income.
- 2023/24 saw an additional 800 PBSA beds brought to the market, at a time when the city had a number of rooms unlet. On-going market instability continues to have a direct impact on PBSA investments
- Rental levels within the PBSA market continue to grow in excess of the student funding model, with concerns being raised by student representative groups around students being pushed into hidden homelessness through 'sofa surfing', over-occupying or unlicensed HMOs. The Housing Bill is expected to place additional responsibility on universities and colleges to respond to student homelessness.
- Scottish Government funding, via the Scottish Funding Council for teaching, has been reduced between 2023-24 and 2024-25, coupled with loss of European Union funding, post-BREXIT. These factors continue to change the demographics of our student mix
- Broader housing pressures have seen the appointment of a new Cabinet Minister, Mairi McAllan, to the role of Housing Secretary to lead the response to the Scotland-wide housing emergency

**In relation to overall student numbers, all four institutions are projecting no significant growth in recruitment in the immediate future. This, however, does not resolve the issue of the estimate 27,000 students who fall outside of the guarantee who require housing in the already pressurised Private Rented Tenancy sector.**





# Conclusions

Students play a vital role in our city and should be considered when meeting the challenges of the current housing crisis, particularly in relation to the availability and pricing of accommodation. We have developed the following considerations, for discussion with relevant stakeholders, three means through which we can reduce pressure on all forms of housing, across the city:

- In line with the ongoing PBSA review, partnership working between Councils and Institutions must be formed. This partnership should explore radical options such as planning dispensation on development on campus land to meet the need for student housing while freeing up sites for general development across the region. This group can also provide oversight of demand, supply and housing mix requirements to aid planning decisions.
- In light of the volume of unaffordable rents across the private PBSA sector, universities must take the lead to collaborate across the area to deliver a model of affordable housing to prevent rent and land purchase inflation across the city.
- Identify opportunities and partnerships to deliver a model to bring together mixed models of housing, where student accommodation is only one component. Such models of multi-tenure and multi-generational housing are prolific across Europe and such models can contribute to housing solutions across the region.