



HOME TRUTHS

#SpeakingUpForStudentHousing



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FOREWORD

For students in Newcastle, a positive housing experience creates memories that will last a lifetime. However, for many in the student community, they face stress, anxiety and uncertainty. This report looks to shine a light and identify some of the key problems that are associated with student housing and share experiences that students have had in this academic year alone. The Home Truths idea is built upon telling the facts about student housing and acting as a force for change in student housing and the wider rental sector. Students should never be in a position where they have to settle for less than anyone else in society and we need a legislative system that stands up for their rights and protects their homes.



Fergus Mainland (Athletics Union Officer 2022)



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NUSU HOME TRUTHS CAMPAIGN REPORT

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This report aims to summarise the findings of the Home Truths Campaign, run by NUSU during the Spring Term of the 2022 academic year. The Campaign aimed to identify the experiences that Newcastle University students have had with private landlords and provide useful recommendations for the City Council going forward. The wide variety of private landlords operating in Newcastle and the large student body searching for housing means these issues are of growing importance. These findings will also be shared with the students in Newcastle Forum (SiNF) to allow for all stakeholders involved to have a full picture of the issues experienced by the 28,000 students during their time studying with the institution¹.

We understand how having a safe and comfortable home environment can shape student experience.

1. Method of Data

The information and personal experiences used throughout this report were collected using an online survey, that the survey respondents completed on their own.

This data, analysed in the forthcoming report, has been collected using a JotForm survey. This survey was opened on the 07/02/22 and closed on the 18/03/22. Overall, it was completed by 55 survey respondents, with 52 of these being Newcastle University students and three of these being Northumbria Students. We recognise the limitations of this research due to its reach being limited across both Universities in the city.

However, we believe the findings remain important as an insight into the experiences of the individual survey respondents. The provision of personal stories and evidential photographs allows for the report recommendations to retain their integrity and be a useful point of information for those wishing to understand the situation for student renters in the city.

1. Figure taken from the Home Truths Campaign website on the NUSU Website: <https://www.nusu.co.uk/hometruths/> (Accessed on the 8/3/22)



1.1 The Renting Environment in Newcastle upon Tyne

Data from 2018 shows that one in every 15 houses in Newcastle is now a student property, a figure only matched by Manchester. This highlights the important responsibility of the Council to provide these residents with comprehensive support. Many of these survey respondents will be renting for the first time and may not have complete clarity on their rights as a renter. Furthermore, with student housing increasing over 30% in a single year, the need for a rigorous analysis of the council's role in governing the landlords operating in the city has become even more clear².

Academic research on student housing has shown that badly maintained properties do not just affect their tenants, but also help increase social distrust of students within a normally non-student area. This is directly applicable to areas within Newcastle such as Jesmond, Sandyford and Shieldfield, all of which have a high proportion of non-student tenants as well as being areas where students chose to move to³.

All of these issues mentioned in the following report do not help facilitate a supportive learning environment for Newcastle students and leaves these tenants with a negative impression of the city as a whole. We believe that the Council can work to improve their relationship with student tenants by taking a clear stand against landlord practices which allow for issues, such as those detailed, to continue.

Research also demonstrates how landlords' failures to maintain their properties can be linked to an increase in neighbourhood crime. Her research notes how student houses tend to have a variety of issues including those such as insanitary kitchen and bathroom facilities, dangerous gas supplies and poor wiring. All of these issues are reflected in the data of the Home Truths Campaign and are issues that need to be addressed by the City Council⁵.

The findings our research are also echoed by those of the 2021 Save the Student National Accommodation Survey, suggesting that the experiences of the students at Newcastle University are part of a wider UK problem with student tenancies⁵. This presents Newcastle City Council with an exciting opportunity to be a forerunner in addressing these housing issues and improving the situation for all its residents.

²<https://www.chroniclelive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/newcastle-highest-rate-student-housing-15115702>

³Universities and Communities, John Goddard's, David Charles, Andy Pike and Gareth Potts, April 1994

⁴Kenyon, Elizabeth L. "Seasonal Sub-Communities: The Impact of Student Households on Residential Communities." *The British Journal of Sociology* 48, no. 2 (1997): 286-301

⁵Save the Student, National Accommodation Survey 2021 (www.savethestudent.org/accommodation/national-student-accommodation-survey-2021.html#housing-issues)





2. Overall findings from the Home Truths

Our data shows that the issues faced by survey respondents are severe and need to be addressed. We have found that often students face problems such as damp and mould, issues surrounding disrepair and maintenance, not helped by rodent infestation. NUSU recognises the affect living in these conditions can have on students' mental health and academic success.



Our data finds that 63% of the survey respondents do not know the support available from the Council and another 16% of these responses suggesting that the survey respondents feel the Council does not care about them. Both options have been lifted directly from the responses from the survey.

We have also recognised a trend that suggests that private landlords who operate independently are often harder to govern in terms of maintaining control over the standard of housing they provide. Disproportionately, the private landlord respondents, who filled in the Home Truths survey, had more issues, than those who were renting from a managing agent or estate agent. There was also a direct correlation between those who had cheaper rents and a lower quality of accommodation or housing, they had more issues with damp

'I feel like students are seen as a bit of a nuisance by the council, especially with how they responded to students throughout the COVID lockdown. I don't think I would look to them for support because I don't think they'd really listen to me or care about my issues. Anytime I have contacted them before I have felt completely disregarded by them and found them to be very condescending.'

Submission 27

and mould, as well as having less control over their relationship with their landlord. Although some may expect these results, this research has uncovered that in some cases very basic needs have been compromised, including heating and water supplies, or serious issues regarding smoke alarms and carbon monoxide alarms, which is unacceptable.'

A large proportion of the survey respondents renting from private landlords highlight specific issues regarding privacy, such as landlords appearing without consent within the rented accommodation. We believe that these findings are one of the most shocking aspects of the data, and such issues need to be addressed as soon as possible, to ensure that student renters can feel safe within their homes.

'Our landlord used to come into our house without any prior warning. As a house of all girls this was unsettling. He sometimes walked into our bedrooms without knocking when we were there and didn't even know he was coming. We used to wonder what he did when we weren't there as he was so unbothered about coming in when we were.'

Submission 19.



2.1 Geographical Trends in Issues with Rented

Overall, survey respondents indicated that they felt more comfortable discussing housing issues with their friends and family rather than seeking out Council support or professional support. This is a specific area that we believe should change, after disseminating recommendations from the data set. Our data shows that students are 10 times more likely to ask for advice from their friends (41%) over searching for support from the University (4%)⁶. The use of informal channels to seek advice underlines the importance of ensuring students are fully educated on the methods of Council support accessible to them.

Our submissions mainly came from the city centre student accommodations as well as the student areas of Jesmond, South Gosforth and Sandyford⁷. This suggests that the Council's approach to addressing the concerns of student renters should be focused within these areas. Furthermore, these areas also house a lot of non-student tenants, by improving the experience of student renters in this area, the Council would make it a more enjoyable space for all to live.

There was also four of the submissions which identified city centre accommodations such as Unite Students as problematic. This suggests that the local Council need to work with the private student accommodation provision to improve the situation faced by those who use both private housing companies and individual estate agents. The Council has a responsibility for all their tenants, regardless of how they rent their houses, it is important that the council maintain tight oversight over these larger housing providers which operate within Newcastle to maintain a high standard for all their renting citizens.

2.2 Issues Surrounding Damp and Mould

A common issue faced by the survey respondents was mould. 22 of the 55 submissions noted that damp and mould was a problem that they experienced, on top of this, all but two of these submissions did not realise the Council support that is available for them to deal with these issues.

According to the UK Government website, it is the landlord's responsibility to keep a rented property 'safe and free from health hazards', with damp and mould being detrimental to a tenant's health⁸. NUSU believes that if the council increases their oversight of the tenant/landlord relationship, more tenants will gain the confidence to address issues such as landlords not respecting tenant privacy. The Council's ability to act as an overseeing body would help enforce the landlord's responsibility to address these issues of damp and mould.

'I experienced damp for five months. I first notified my estate agents of my concern in August. The problem worsened from October onwards and within six weeks I experienced two chest infections.'

Submission 30

⁶ See Figure 1 in Appendix

⁷ see Fig.5 for a map of submissions

⁸ <https://www.gov.uk/renting-out-a-property>



Furthermore, in the Government's 'Housing Health and Safety Rating System' damp and mould is specifically listed⁹. This report notes how damp and mould can directly contribute to breathing difficulties, depression, anxiety, asthma or fungal infections, all of which lead to a conclusion that it is the landlord's clear legal responsibility to address these issues.

We believe that if the Council reinforces their presence within the tenant and landlord relationship, more tenants will gain the confidence to address issues such as damp and mould and be able to live in a house that is free from health hazards.

⁹ [Housing Health and Safety Rating System: Guidance for Landlords and Property Related Professionals](#), Department for Communities and Local Government, May 2006, p.22





2.3 Understanding the Position of Estate Agents Compared to Private Individual Landlords

Four of the 55 submissions were from students who rented from independent landlords. These four submissions had the third cheapest rent, only being ‘beaten’ by Walton Robinson and Portland Residential. However, overall, these four submissions had a notable higher proportion of issues, varying from general disrepair, issues with landlords to affordability. We have identified that a variety of privacy issues are much more likely with a private landlord, compared to a property which is managed by a third party or estate agent.

Further research has shown that property owners who chose to rent their accommodation themselves have complete control over every aspect of their property¹⁰. These private and independent landlords, therefore, are effectively the only access of support for their tenants. This can result in a lack of effective support for the tenants. If students suffer a bad relationship with their landlord, this affects their options going forward, as the landlord is their only point of contact for the management of their property. We have seen this reflected directly in our findings. One submission from a tenant who rents from a private landlord, specifically noted the worry of being evicted from their accommodation if the house was found to meet council standards anyway, after they had reported it differently.

Some tenants of private landlords deal with the issues of misrepresentation as well as increase in rents mid tenancy, such as Submission 38, which notes a £20 a week increase in charges, which when queried was dismissed by their landlord as ‘he needed the money’.

The lack of clarity on how students can maintain a good working relationship with private landlords is the source of many of these complex issues that the data set has detailed. Issues of privacy and unannounced visits are increased within private landlord and tenant relationships. Clearer guidance from the Council on what students can expect from such landlords, and their rights as a tenant, would embolden students to address these issues directly.

¹⁰ <https://www.axa.co.uk/landlord-insurance/landlord-vs-letting-agent/>





2.4 Analysing the Variety of Issues Faced by Students in the Housing Market

A key aim of our Home Truths Campaign has been to create a useable database of individual stories, experiences and evidential photographs to show the variety of issues that student tenants have experienced. One question in the survey focused on detailing these issues that the students encountered.

26% of our submissions had experienced issues of damp, and 100% of our submissions had experienced more than a singular issue. A variety of these responses noted how landlords overcharged them for cleaning fees or other maintenance jobs, which could be considered key to keeping the property liveable, such as repairing carbon monoxide alarms and smoke alarms. The respondents from the survey noted a lack of knowledge regarding their rights as tenants, this may have facilitated a lack of trust in the council's ability to support them.

Other issues faced by the survey respondents can be seen in the appendix¹¹, such as a variety of landlord issues, as aforementioned in 2.1. These issues cannot be understated, as they threaten the need for a safe and secure home for the student renters in Newcastle. Issues such as access to water and the smell of sewage in a variety of the submissions calls into question the suitability of some of the properties being advertised as homes for students. 6% of the submissions noted how they had issues with infestations of rodents or insects, again this seems like an issue which threatens the safety of the home environment, as a clean and secure place for students to live.



¹¹ Figure 2.



2.5 How Students Perceive Council Support

Many of our surveyed students believe that the Council do not offer support or want to help address the issues they have with their landlords. Many of the submissions indicated a distrust for the Council when it came to addressing these issues or were completely unaware of the support they offered. This is illustrated in Figure 3 in the Appendix, with over 70% of submissions demonstrating a lack of clarity over Council support or feeling that the Council ‘didn’t care’.

Submissions such as number 29, clearly state this:

‘I feel like students are seen as a bit of a nuisance by the council, especially with how they responded to students throughout the COVID lockdown. I don't think I would look to them for support because I don't think they'd really listen to me or care about my issues. Anytime I have contacted them before I have felt complexly disregarded by them and found them to be very condescending.’

Furthermore, only four of our 55 submissions knew how to contact the council in regard to issues relating to their tenancy. Students need to be reassured that the council is available to support all residents who rent within the city.

It is clear from this data collected that the Council could do more to advertise the support available to students, which would allow them to seek information not just from informal methods (such as family or friends) but from the city council themselves. We believe that through a campaign of clear and supportive advertisements, the Council can work to repair this relationship between the council and student residents.



3. Individual Stories and Experiences

The individual cases that the submissions detail allow for this report to be as useful as possible, through use of individual experiences, stories and photos, those who read this work are able to really understand the situation of student renters.

Below is a selection of photos and stories from two submissions. We believe that these submissions illustrate the variety of issues that we have found from our research, especially when added to the variety of quotes which we have included throughout the previous sections

Submission 54

'House is in a state of disrepair with all windows in the property being single glazed sash windows many of which the weights have broken meaning they do not stay open. Many of the windows are painted shut so you cannot adequately ventilate the property. There have also been leaks from the bathroom into the kitchen.'

'The main issue in the house is the damp and mould on the north-facing side. Items of clothing in the small front bedroom have gone mouldy and I am now having to take prescribed antihistamines to live in the house as the mould sets off my allergies so much. The window only has 1 working handle with the other having come off due to the wood being rotten and damp. There are various different types of mould growing on the window. and water pools on top of the sash window. I have been in near-constant contact with Walton Robinson throughout the first term and nothing has been done to adequately fix the problem'



Submission 51

'In my last flat, H&M Residential, I moved in when one window was completely broken off its hinges and would not open or shut, and the other window also had a bad lock and was full of mould. They came and replaced the one really bad window but said they didn't have the budget allocated to fixing the other one. I also had water damage from a leaky roof and it took them months to fix it, so I lived in a very damp, mouldy studio over lockdown and couldn't go anywhere to escape.'

'For the current place, they were very irate when I moved in and reported issues over their portal. They said I should call instead which prevents a paper trail. I tried calling to report issues but was often gaslit or they would say they would follow up but never get on with it. In the end, I have several requests over the maintenance portal that have never been resolved and no explanation why, and have several undocumented requests because I did as they said and called instead. I reported issues including water damage that have not been addressed at all.'





4. Recommendations

We believe that Newcastle City Council are in a strong and influential position to help improve the living experiences of those who rent within the area.

Our recommendations for the Council moving forward, based on the data and the analysis in this report are that:

1. Private landlords who have student tenants require as much oversight as those that are operating within a larger estate agent. Overall, we have found that students who are with private landlords tend to experience the highest amount of issues. They also seem to have less understanding about their rights regarding their tenancy and the council support they have access to, when compared to those who rent off a managing agent or contact with an estate agent.
2. Landlords and Estate Agents should provide new tenants with clear instructions on how to contact them and the council if they come into any issues, this information shouldn't be hidden from their tenants.
3. The council should take steps to reassure student renters that they are heard and appreciated, by providing clearer signposting regarding the variety of channels of contact when a student renter has an issue. This renewal of confidence in the Council will allow for students within the city to have an, overall, more comfortable and positive experience during their time studying here. We recommend an advertising campaign or another form of information spreading such as a door to door campaign in student areas of the city.



5. Appendix

Figure 1.

Where would you go to seek support or advice on issues surrounding your tenancy?

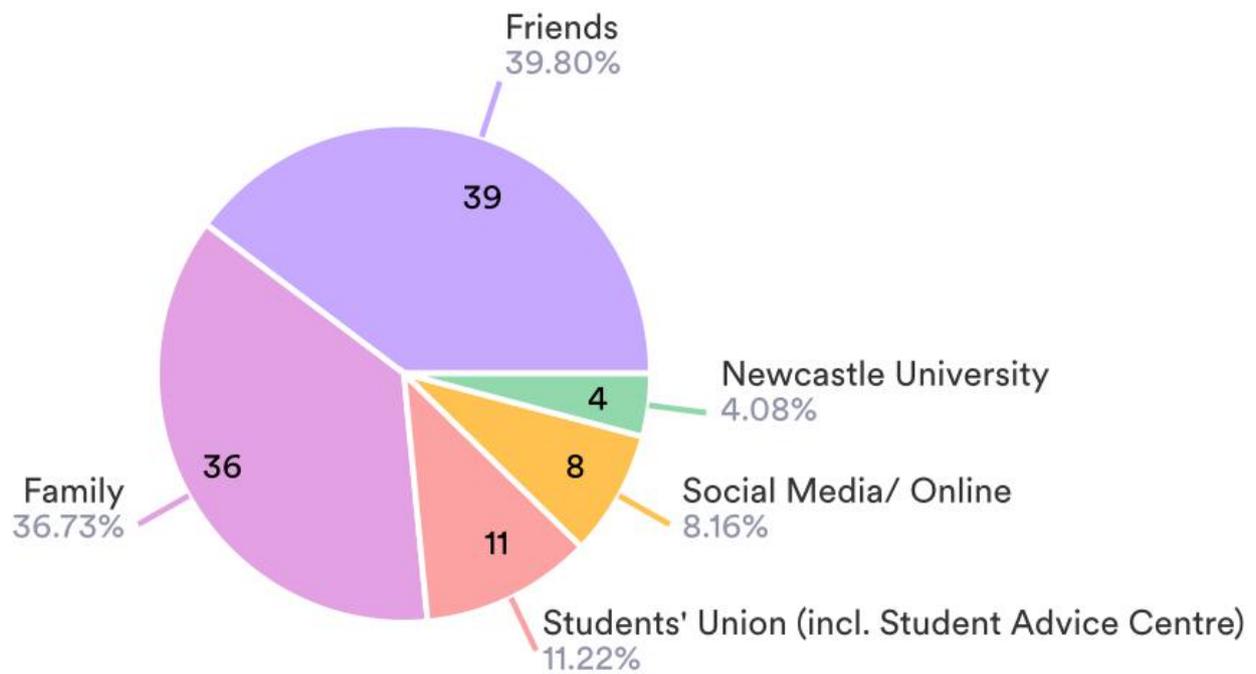


Figure 2.

What Housing Issue are you facing?

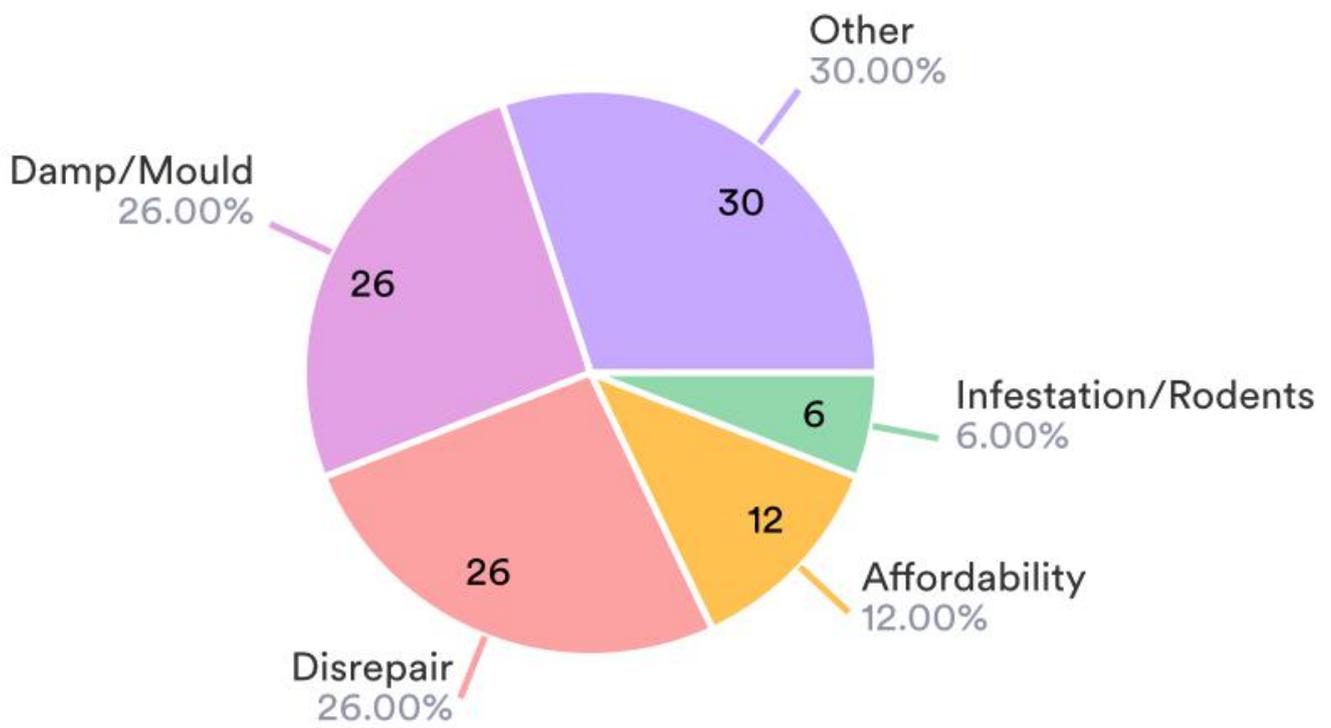
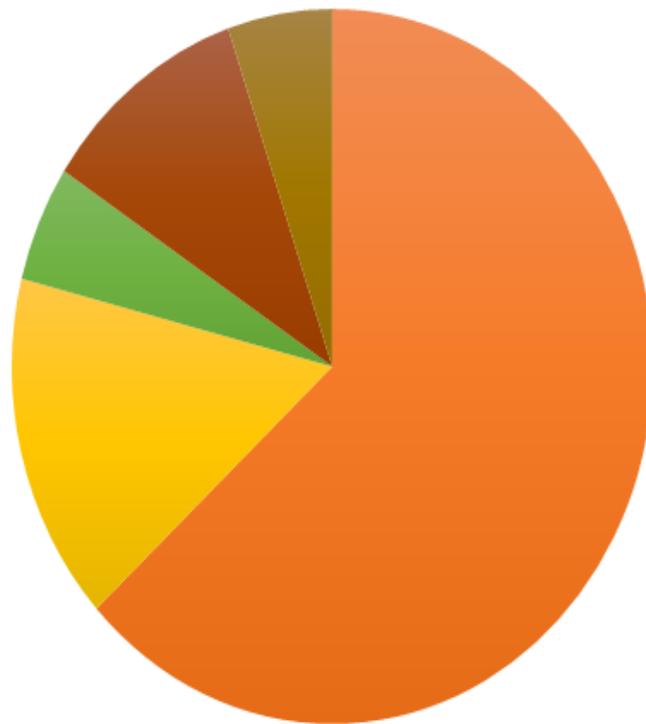


Figure 3.

Why students have not contacted the council for advice?



- Unsure of Support Available
- Felt like the council did not care
- Slow replies/bad communication
- Lack of evidence
- Told there was nothing that could be done
- Unsure on how to contact the council



Figure 4.

Do you feel adequately supported by the City Council?

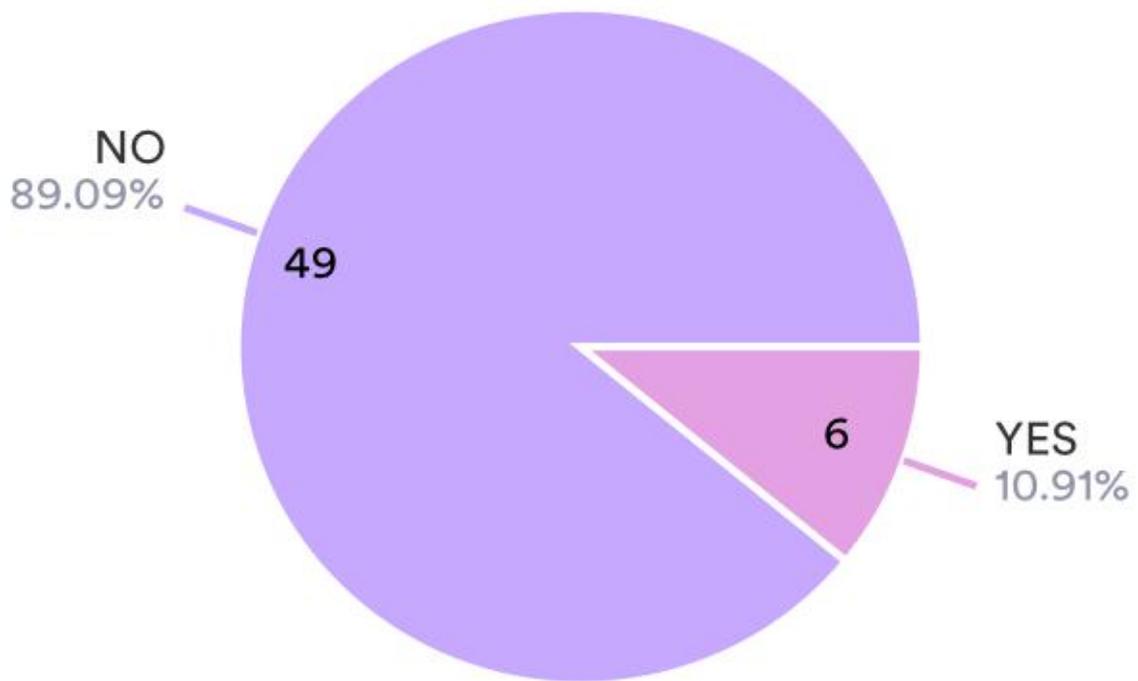
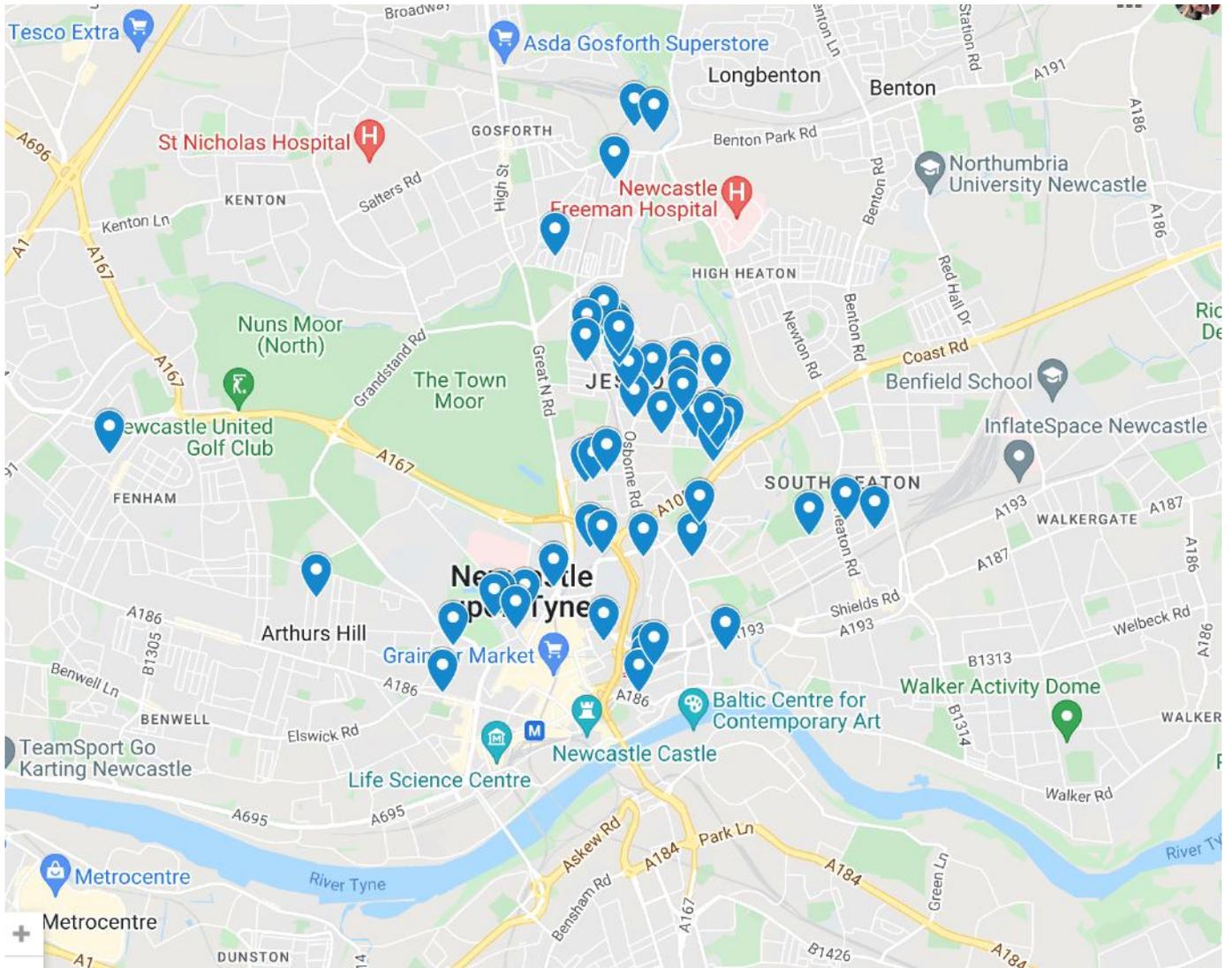


Figure 5.

Map of submissions who provided location information





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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

NUSU SABBATICAL TEAM

NUSU STUDENT ADVICE CENTRE

NUSU YOUR VOICE TEAM

NUSU DIGITAL COMMS TEAM

NORTHUMBRIA UNIVERSITY STUDENTS UNION

NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY CAREERS SERVICE

HOME TRUTH REPORT INTERN—JASMINE CHIMA





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