

## Working with Students – Reflections from our Student Advisory Committee

By Dan Thompson,  
*Influencing and Engagement Assistant at Student Minds*

Our Student Advisory Committee (SAC) met for the fourth and final time this year last month (time flies!). This meeting was our only 'in-person' one of the year as part of our hybrid approach to student engagement, aiming to make our student opportunities as accessible as possible. It was great to put a face to digital names, sharing a space to discuss our campaigning priorities and reflect on the year gone. In the meeting we ran an evidence session for our upcoming Student Mental Health Manifesto work, discussed student housing, and had time to look back on another great year for our SAC. In this reflection piece I am joined by SAC member Mia Brady to run you through our meeting.



Before we dive into the content, the Student Minds team would like to give a special shout out to our long-serving members who will be moving on from SAC this year: Elizabeth, Kevin, Mia, Ruth, Sarah, and Tom. Thank you so much for two years of passionate and unwavering support for student mental health. You have all contributed invaluable insights to the strategic goals of the charity, and we know you will all go on to great things.

### Student Mental Health Manifesto: Evidence Session

As discussed in our [July meeting's reflections](#), the team is gearing up for the upcoming general election, looking to set our campaigning priorities for the years ahead of us. We want to ensure student mental health is taken seriously by our politicians and state institutions. We, alongside numerous other charities in the sector, were disappointed to see that [the reform of the Mental Health Bill](#) did not make it into the King's Speech. The mental health and wellbeing of our children and young people must be a priority for the next government, and we will do all we can to make sure no student is left behind.

To that end, we are currently in the process of creating a manifesto for student mental health. Our manifesto stems from a desire to set out our campaigning priorities for the years ahead, focusing on areas such as society and culture, transitions, and the healthcare system. We are currently in the midst of our research, working alongside a student-led steering group to pull together a range of expert voices on student mental health.

This session contributed to our internal research, having already conducted an evidence session within our staff team. We are so lucky to hold such a wealth of knowledge within our internal structure and both sessions have proved incredibly valuable. We will now be drawing on expertise across multiple sector bodies and charities and hope that we can accurately reflect what is going on

in the student population, and what solutions are available at the legislative level. By exploring the key issues impacting student wellbeing and the policy approaches required to support our students through the higher education experience, we believe we can make a strong and lasting impact on improving student mental health.

If you are interested in supporting our manifesto work, or feel you have something to contribute, then [please get in touch](#).

## Housing

One issue that will be undoubtedly covered in our manifesto will be student housing. We recognise that there are multiple types of student accommodation and that each student will have their own relationship with housing prior to entering higher education. What is imperative, though, is that every student has the right to safe, affordable, and good quality housing. We know that housing is a key determinant of mental health and wellbeing throughout the population, and we believe that it is vital that universities, and the government, support students with the knowledge and tools required to access good quality accommodation.

[Preece and Bimson's research](#) on mental health and housing in Wales split concerns into three main areas: financial, spatial, and relational. These three areas broadly cover the concerns cited during our session with SAC members, who hold a range of lived and vocational experiences in housing. There were major concerns over the financial aspects of student housing, a sentiment shared by the Student Minds team at a time when maintenance loans are failing to keep up with inflation and the cost of bills continue to rise. [Save the Student's National Student Accommodation](#) survey found that the proportion of students struggling with rent has risen since 2022, from 53% to 63% this year. 67% of students surveyed also reported that their mental health is impacted by rental costs, highlighting the link between affordability and mental health.

Members also recognised issues with the quality of student dwellings and thus the space they inhabit. The spaces we live in can, if given access to areas such as natural light, proximity to green spaces, and control over layouts, have a positive impact on our mental health and wellbeing. Yet it is so often the case that students, notably in the private rented sector, have limited access to these factors. Issues with the quality of housing are also commonplace, with [SOS UK finding](#) that 54% of students reported damp and mould in the private rental sector. One SAC member stated that "it is just widely accepted that as a student you have poor housing conditions", which is a worrying sentiment. Not only should we look to address the issues with student housing now, but we should be ambitious in our goals as a sector to reshape the expectations on student housing.

SAC members also noted that their experiences with UK housing can inhibit their ability to integrate both into the student community, if forced to live far away from campus, and into the wider community. Although student housing can be beneficial for relationships and feelings of identity and belonging, as many students live in shared accommodation with friends, sharing with peers or strangers can be a challenging experience. It is vital that we continue to support students away from university campuses and bridge the gap between home and university locations.

Finally, members of the SAC highlighted inequalities within the student housing experience for certain demographics of students and modes of study. International students, for example, have difficulties accessing support for housing (such as requiring a British guarantor and having to pay for multiple months upfront) and have limited access to work, which may impact their ability to afford accommodation. Housing with suitable accommodations for disabled students is often in short supply and at higher cost. These issues reinforce existing inequalities in higher education, particularly when it comes to mental health, as those who are already traditionally disadvantaged are forced to deal with further challenges that their peers do not have to face. Our responses to improving student housing must be inclusive and hold a wide understanding of the issues and barriers that certain students may face. The best way to do so is to engage our student communities and co-design policy and accommodation with students moving forwards.

## Reflecting on the SAC Experience

By Mia Brady

*SAC member and Student Experience Coordinator at the University of Sussex*

For me, and several other SAC members, this wasn't just the last meeting of the year, it was also the end of our time on SAC. Alongside the sadness around finishing this chapter, I feel extremely grateful for all the experiences that I've had over the past two years.



At each meeting, we discussed a number of topics that were relevant to the current conversation around student mental health. This included, but was not limited to, the impact of climate change on student mental health, Student Minds' campaign work in the run up to the next general election, the growing role of AI in higher education, the ongoing marking and assessment boycott, and the continuing development of the University Mental Health Charter. Something I really appreciated about these discussions is that everyone's unique perspective was valued and it always felt like a safe space where we agreed to treat each other with respect, even when we had different opinions. I used to struggle with speaking in larger groups, and sometimes still do, but being on SAC has helped me develop the confidence to share my honest thoughts - by the final meeting, I actually had to work hard to not be constantly speaking!

The final SAC meeting of the year has been my favourite for both years I've been involved, as this is when we get to hear how our feedback has influenced the work Student Minds are doing. Knowing that the discussions we've had have a tangible influence on Student Minds' work is incredibly rewarding and I'm excited to see how this develops further in the future.

Our impact isn't limited to the work of Student Minds. In 2022, myself and several SAC members contributed to the [HE Postvention Guidance](#) on how to respond to a student suicide. This document was developed by Universities UK in collaboration with POPYRUS and Samaritans as a vital resource advising higher education institutions on how they should respond to deaths by suicide. Through my role on SAC, I've also become part of the Department for Education's taskforce on student mental health, allowing me to further extend my influence on shaping the future of mental health in higher education.

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One of the best things about being on SAC is, undoubtedly, the people. It's not just the brilliant SAC members, who are all passionate and inspiring people, but the team at Student Minds who make the experience what it is. Everyone I've met while working with Student Minds has been warm, thoughtful, caring, and absolutely dedicated to improving student mental health on a national scale. Knowing that these are the people keeping student mental health on the agenda gives me hope that we'll see further improvements in years to come.

I remember being told in one of our first meetings, that nobody who joins Student Minds ever really leaves. It turns out that this is true and, while I may have finished my time on SAC, I'm excited to continue my work as a University Mental Health Charter Award Panel Member and soon be starting work as an Award Assessor. If you're considering applying to work with Student Minds, my advice would be to go for it - if your experience is half as good as mine, then you won't be disappointed.

## Learn More

*If you'd like to read more about our SAC, [check out our webpage](#) which introduces our members. We are nearing the end of our recruitment for next year's SAC, so keep an eye out for our new cohort!*