

## NUS Open Letter to the National Housing Federation Regarding Coronavirus and Student Renters

Dear Kate Henderson,

I am writing to you in your role as the CEO of the National Housing Federation (NHF). We are living through an unprecedented social crisis as a result of Coronavirus. Students and renters are being hit extremely hard. We are writing to you as the national representative body for the Housing Association (HA) sector as we believe some of your members are failing to recognise their responsibilities to their student renters. We are a great supporter of social housing and the values-driven work that the NHF does on a range of issues important to the student movement such as building safety. We hope you can communicate our disapproval and urge your members to reconsider their actions in line with the asks outlined in this letter.

HAs are supposed to provide good, affordable housing to all who need it. Yet, in recent years, many HAs have decided to treat student renters as if they are an exception to this rule. There is a [well-documented crisis in affordability](#) for student renters. The average rent in Purpose-Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) swallows 73% of the maximum available maintenance loan an English undergraduate can receive – and most do not receive this. Many HAs have taken advantage of this crisis and established PBSA operations to subsidize their other activity. It is unclear why these HAs believe that students do not need affordable housing.

As social housing providers, HAs have a moral responsibility to protect all their tenants through this time of crisis and take into account the needs of each demographic they house. We have written to Universities UK, the British Property Federation and the National Residential Landlord's Association outlining [our five asks](#) for student accommodation providers to protect students through this pandemic. NUS is lobbying government to act on these issues but all accommodation providers have the power to implement these asks voluntarily now.

Universities are also charities, and [most have acted](#) to protect their student tenants from the impact of Coronavirus. Furthermore, a number of for-profit PBSA providers have also acted. Your members house thousands of students in the UK and it is antithetical to the values on which HAs are founded if they do not act to protect student renters.

### **1. HAs must stay updated with, and implement best practice public health guidance, communicate clearly with their tenants and provide maximum support.**

The government has released specific [guidance for PBSA providers](#) and for [landlords in general](#) we want to see all HAs follow this in full and keep updated with any changes to it. In addition, it is vital that they communicate with their student tenants clearly and often regarding the public health provisions that are being put in place in their accommodation. Students must be supported fully, both materially and pastorally, through the crisis – especially if/when they must self-isolate. HAs must communicate clearly and often with the universities in which their tenants are studying and do this regardless of whether they have a formal partnership or nomination agreement in place. For students who are particularly at-risk to Coronavirus, NUS want to see accommodation providers putting in place additional support. This may include supporting those students, if they wish, to move to a 'less shared' accommodation option in their immediate portfolio, such as a studio or en-suite room, at no additional cost.

## **2. Every HA must offer students a no-penalty early release from tenancy contracts or rent obligations for the current and next academic year**

All universities have now either ceased operation or moved provision online and closed the majority of their campus facilities. Many students will either have had to, or chosen to, return to an alternative residence as a result of Coronavirus. Students have been navigating travel restrictions to their home countries, many have health conditions that left them at greater risk in shared student accommodation and many students left their accommodation before the 23<sup>rd</sup> March lockdown (which is now set to last until at least 7<sup>th</sup> May) and are completely unable to return as a result.

Students who have left their accommodation early must be offered the opportunity of a no-penalty release from their tenancy contract or rent obligations at the earliest opportunity. Many universities have already done this, as have private sector providers such as Unite and Liberty Living. We are extremely concerned by the activities of HA PBSA providers including Sanctuary and Optivo regarding this issue. Students at SOAS are having to take drastic action in the form of [a rent strike](#) against Sanctuary despite [public documents showing](#) they have extraordinary sums of money to hand. They are clearly choosing to not support students out of some form of 'principle'. HAs should be setting an example to private providers, not the other way around and placing additional financial pressure on students in this time of crisis, when they are not even utilising the accommodation, is wrong.

It is also possible that lockdown procedures or a delay to the next academic year will prevent many students from moving into accommodation that they have already signed an agreement for. If this happens, HAs should offer a similar release from contract for those students. If a student wishes to be released in either of these situations and rent has already been taken for forthcoming months, it must be refunded along with their deposit. The business model of letting to students is based on university physically occurring, and unfortunately at this time it is not. Students must not be further penalised for this. We have raised with the Competition and Market Authority in the past that the practice of landlords getting students to sign tenancy agreements many months in advance of them actually moving in is a form of pressure selling. We have since contacted the CMA again to further highlight this problem in the context of the current crisis.

## **3. Absolutely no evictions must take place for the duration of the crisis**

Many students will be forced to overstay the original timeframes of their tenancy agreement and, as outlined in section 4 of this letter, will experience issues in paying rent. The government guidance for PBSA providers is very clear on the issue of evictions. In addition, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government [introduced a holistic ban on evictions for at least 3 months](#). We expect all HAs to follow this guidance in both letter and spirit.

## **4. Any tenants who are financially impacted by the Coronavirus must have their rents subsidised, significantly reduced or waived entirely for 6 months**

Many students who remain in their term-time accommodation will be experiencing financial hardship. Student finance systems in the UK are paying their final instalments. However, we know from a wealth of data that student finance rarely covers the cost of rent. Students rely on support from their families, wages from part-time work and private debt to meet their living costs. The first two of these income streams are likely to have been significantly impacted by the current crisis and to ask students to be saddled even more with the latter would be wrong.

In addition, many students do not receive student finance and others may be forced to overstay their tenancy without having financially planned to do so.

Whilst we continue to call on government to financially support students in this time of crisis, if HAs have students who face difficulties paying their rent, we are urging them to significantly reduce or waive entirely those obligations for 6 months. Indeed, given that many students have now been instructed to stay put, when they may have moved out and taken the option of a release from contract (if it was being offered), reductions in rent should be implemented pre-emptively like universities including Winchester and UCLAN have opted to do.

Under no circumstances should students be building up rent arrears to be paid back at a later date. The current crisis has no immediate end in sight and saddling students with such debt is unacceptable.

#### **5. Suspend all rent increases for the next 12 months**

Finally, whilst we do not know exactly what the future holds we know that it would be wrong to exacerbate the financial difficulties of student renters at this time and in the near future. We are asking all HAs who house students to suspend any rent increases during this crisis for current tenants and any that were planned for the next academic year.

If the thousands of students living in HA owned accommodation are exploited and left without the protections given by many universities and for-profit providers during this crisis the HA sector's reputation will be badly damaged. The student movement is a great supporter of social housing and we hope you can urge your members to reconsider their actions.

Yours sincerely,

**Eva Crossan Jory,**

**Vice-President for Welfare**

**National Union of Students**