

Ms Michelle Donelan MP  
Minister of State for Universities

9 April 2020

Dear Madam,

### **Students renting private sector accommodation**

We are the Sabbatical Officer Team of the Falmouth and Exeter Students' Union, which represents students of both Falmouth University and the University of Exeter (Cornwall Campuses).

The purpose of this letter is to inform you of the concerns that exists among those of our members who rent private sector houses and flats (including HMOs) and to lobby for action that protects our members' interests.

Given the large number of relatively small-scale private sector landlords, it is not possible for individual students' unions to negotiate directly with this group of landlords. In contrast, liaising with our two Universities and the two 'local' private sector Purpose Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) companies is relatively straightforward. Not least for this reason, we believe that there is a greater scope for Government intervention in the non-PBSA private sector market for rented accommodation.

Our members have two particular concerns:

1. That in relation to the current academic year, many are subject to tenancies of accommodation that they will not occupy again, while remaining liable to pay the rent through until the end of the contractual accommodation period; and
2. Thousands of students have entered into tenancy agreements for accommodation for 2020-21, some commencing as early as July, while

no longer knowing when they might be able to move in (if, indeed, they will be able to or need to move in at all). Meanwhile, similarly, the obligation to pay rent prevails.

We are conscious that NUS is already lobbying Government on these and related issues. In this respect:

1. Government must ensure that renters who are financially impacted by the Coronavirus have their forthcoming rents subsidised, significantly reduced or waived entirely for 3 months – with the option to renew if needed.
2. Every student landlord must offer a no-penalty release from tenancy contracts for the current and next academic year.

Our Students' Union agrees with these demands that the NUS make.

In relation to current year tenancies, whilst we appreciate that students will still receive next term's maintenance loan instalment, the following points should also be taken into account:

- The action described above would place this group of students in broadly the same position as those students occupying University- owned accommodation and PBSAs. In this respect, most universities and PBSA owners appear to have given students an option to terminate their accommodation contracts.
- Many students rely on additional income from part-time employment, most of which will have ceased thereby reducing their ability to pay their rent.
- Similarly, many students' household income – against which their maintenance loan entitlement is assessed - will have undergone a material and sudden reduction. While the student funding regulations include provision to address a change in household income, given the volume of households that are likely to be

affected, there is no prospect of the student funding agencies being able to process timeously the large number of requests they will receive for re-assessment of entitlement.

- Further, and in any event, given the large number of household budgets that one can reasonably expect to be adversely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, one can reasonably expect several students to need to use next term's maintenance loan to supplement the family household budget.

As regards tenancies that students have entered into for 2020-21, I accept that the need for action is not as urgent (though any extended delay would change that position).

Nevertheless, positive Government action would have the effect of removing the uncertainty that 'hangs over' students, who sense they may no longer need and cannot afford the financial burden imposed by the tenancy agreement they have entered into for next year's studies. Such action can also be expected to have a positive action on students' mental health which, as is widely recognised, currently is often fragile.

Falmouth & Exeter Students' Union recognises that these are unusual and difficult times for society and Government. However, it also recognises that such times require decisive and sometimes radical responses. Not least through the Chancellor's recent announcements, the Government has demonstrated an appetite for such action. With this in mind, our request might be described as 'more of the same'.

Yours faithfully

Allie Guy, President Welfare and Inclusivity

Joe Rigby, President Exeter

Callie Edwards, President Falmouth



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