

NUS Open Letter to Non-University Purpose-Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) Providers

We are living through an unprecedented social crisis as a result of Coronavirus. Students and renters are being hit extremely hard. The majority of students living in PBSA are no longer living in university-owned and/or managed accommodation. As a result of this dominance, PBSA providers have a significant moral responsibility to protect their tenants in this time of crisis.

We are also writing to Universities UK and landlords in the Private Rented Sector with our 5 'asks' for accommodation providers, the full rationale behind these asks is outlined in our [recent article for WonkHE](#). NUS is lobbying government on these issues but PBSA providers have the power to implement these asks voluntarily now.

You house hundreds of thousands of students and there is a real opportunity for you to show leadership, protect students and your reputation.

1. Student accommodation providers must stay updated with, and implement best practice public health guidance, communicate clearly with their tenants and provide maximum support.

The government has released [guidance](#) for PBSA providers and we want to see all of you this in full and keep updated with any changes to it. In addition, it is vital that you communicate with your 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 by you – especially if/when they must self-isolate.

You must communicate clearly and often with the universities in which your tenants are studying and do this regardless of whether you have a formal partnership or nomination agreement in place.

For students who are particularly at-risk to Coronavirus, NUS want to see providers putting in place additional support. This may include supporting those students, if they wish, to move to a less shared accommodation option in your immediate portfolio, such as a studio or en-suite room, at no additional cost.

2. Every student accommodation provider must offer 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 to, or wish to, return to an alternative residence as a result of Coronavirus.

Students who wish to leave 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, but the sector must have a collective, uniform response. Placing additional financial pressure on students in this time of crisis, when they are not even utilising the accommodation, is wrong.

It is 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, you 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.

Your business model is based on university physically occurring, and unfortunately at this time it is not. Students must not be further penalised for this.

We understand that either of these actions may place you at financial risk. Where you are able to absorb this cost, you should. For those of you that would be placed in demonstrable crisis, NUS would support the opening of discussions with government to support you to do the right thing by your tenants.

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

The government guidance for PBSA providers is very clear on the issue of evictions. In addition, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government [confirmed a holistic ban on evictions](#) for at least 3 months. We understand that these measures now protect students renting via License Agreements.

In addition, we know that Stand Alone, the Unite Foundation and NNECL have written to accommodation providers regarding the needs of estranged and care-experienced students and we ask you to also implement their asks.

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 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 contracts without having financially planned to do so.

Whilst we continue to call on government to financially support students in this time of crisis, if you have students who face difficulties paying their rent, we are asking institutions 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, this should be done pre-emptively.

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. We are asking all accommodation providers to suspend any rent increases during this crisis for current tenants and any that were planned for the next academic year.

We are asking you to take the actions outlined in this letter to protect students in the here and now. However, your actions could also show leadership to other landlords and by extension protect the interests of millions of renters across the UK who are currently facing a deeply uncertain time.

Yours sincerely,

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Vice-President for Welfare

National Union of Students