

Dear Council,

We hope you and your loved ones are doing well during these worrying times. We write to you regarding an urgent matter detailed in the open letter below. On the second page you will find the letter we sent to MPs and Councillors and on the third page we have provided an update on the campaign.

Dear Non-University Purpose-Built Student Accommodation Providers and Houses of Multiple Occupancy,

As lead representatives of Brighton Students' Union, we believe, as always, it is our duty to protect the over 20,000 students we serve during this unsettling time in relation to the developing COVID-19 situation and its impact on accommodation rent payments. Up and down the country, students have been returning home in increasing numbers due to guidance issued by the Government and their University. In doing so they have rightly prioritised their personal safety and protected the national interest, yet they now find themselves facing great uncertainty with their rent payments. It is wholly unjust for them to be financially penalised for carrying out their civic duty and therefore save lives. The relationship we have with the wider community is one we take very seriously, and we value these ties. You undoubtedly play a critical role in the area's residential ecosystem and we ask you to join us in supporting our students by showing flexibility in residential contracts for those in privately run Purpose-Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) and Houses of Multiple Occupancy (HMOs). We firmly believe students should not harbour the financial burden as the responsibility to do so rests with yourselves. Unite and Liberty Living's recent announcement makes it clear it is within your power as providers, owing to your complex mitigation plans, and we sincerely hope you would undertake these measures voluntarily for the sake of our students. For landlords who experience a financial impact as a result of this, you have access to a three-month mortgage holiday. We join the National Union of Students in lobbying Government to further support you in doing the right thing by students. Officers from both Unions have come together to propose 8 measures we strongly urge you to undertake:

1. Offer students a no-penalty release from their tenancy contracts, both for the current and upcoming academic year.
2. Refund those students who have paid rent and a deposit for the upcoming period.
3. Effectively reduce, subsidize or waive rent for tenants who have experienced a detrimental financial impact as a result of the Coronavirus.
4. Operate a holistic ban on evictions for all renters during this pandemic.
5. Stop all rent increases planned for the current and upcoming academic year.
6. Allow students with health conditions that increase their risk to the Coronavirus and thus wish to relocate to a more isolated part of their PBSA to do so at no extra cost.
7. In line with Liberty Living's stance, offer free of charge support beyond their current tenancy to those needing to extend their stay. This is crucial for international students who are unable to leave due to travel restrictions and for students who do not wish to return home to avoid placing a vulnerable member of their household at increased risk.
8. Implement and offer student tenants access to best practice public health advice, in addition to providing them with material and pastoral support.

The values you enact going forward in addressing the measures outlined above will shape our student community and society as a whole for years to come. There is no doubt this is the right thing to do. The business model, which is the very foundation of student accommodation, is singlehandedly dependent on the physical occurrence of university and the fact it has now moved to a virtual environment means the risk should be absorbed by providers and not by students. They are counting on your support and we hope you will provide it.

Yours Sincerely,

Brighton Students' Union

Dear Caroline Lucas MP, Lloyd Russell-Moule MP, Peter Kyle MP, Caroline Ansell MP and City Councillors,

As lead representatives of Brighton Students' Union, we feel compelled to write to you to address a rising concern impacting the 20,000 members of our student community in relation to the developing COVID-19 pandemic. This deeply unsettling time has had an array of effects and a chief concern pertains to accommodation rent payments. An increasing number of students have been returning home in accordance with guidance issued by the Government to ensure personal safety and to protect the national interest, leaving them to face great uncertainty with rent payments. We sincerely hope the Student Accommodation Sector will come together quickly, moving past the current fragmented approach in adopting best practice. We are reaching out to you to support us in lobbying private third-party providers, including Purpose-Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) and Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs), to enable students wishing to terminate their contracts to do so by offering the option of a cost-free release to all tenants. The area's residential ecosystem and the future of our student community depend on this. We all share a collective duty to amplify these concerns.

On March 24, Unite and Liberty Living made a welcomed announcement, yet this best practice is not being adopted across the board. Government intervention is necessary, and your support is critical in ensuring that PBSA providers and landlords act on these issues voluntarily, which is well within their powers. While some have done so, others are refusing to waive these fees, which is deeply unjust. Students should in no way be financially penalised for respecting Government guidance and embracing their civic duty, thus saving lives. Landlords who experience a financial impact have access to a three-month mortgage holiday.

In writing this letter, we are speaking on behalf of tens of thousands of students across the city and they are counting on your support. Anxiety is at an all-time high and the current fragmented approach only exacerbates matters. We urge you to join us in ensuring that accommodation providers allow students to surrender their tenancies with immediate effect. At the moment, it is still possible to avert a crisis for student renters, as long as swift action is taken to guarantee that providers who are well placed to absorb these costs, do so. This will prevent untold damage from being done to the sector and protect our student community for years to come. We look forward to hearing from you. Please find attached a copy of the open letter that has been sent to non-University PBSA providers and HMOs.

Yours Sincerely,

Brighton Students' Union

In summary, following the closure of the Universities of Brighton and Sussex due to COVID-19, the vast majority of students decided to return to their family home for various reasons, including needing to support relatives, taking up caring responsibilities, wanting to self-isolate with their family and no longer being able to access critical campus services. They have embraced their civic duty and have remained home during this period, adhering to Government Guidance, and in turn helped save lives. Yet, they are being financially penalised by the private accommodation sector. Students who have vacated their properties are still being forced to pay rent. While the University of Brighton has released students from their third term fees for those who reside in its accommodation, the vast majority of private providers and landlords are refusing to do so. Our students rely on part-time and vocational jobs alongside their maintenance loans to pay rent. Many of these jobs are zero-hour contracts that now cease to exist. Without the means to pay rent and the property having been vacated, it seems only fair and just to release them from their housing contracts early. Whilst students will still receive their student loans for the final term of the academic year, for the majority this amount will not be enough to pay their rent, bills and food. Many do not have parents or family that can afford to help them financially, some have dependants and others many not even have access to loans, relying solely on zero hours contract that no longer exists. Many students will be forced to find alternative funding such as further debt and credit borrowing to support their families as well as themselves during this time. In addition, many students have opted to volunteer for the NHS, some even working on the front line to fight this pandemic. The University of Brighton has announced that students will not be coming back to campus to study for the final term this year.

We have now contacted 97 different, landlords, letting agents and purpose-built student accommodation providers about the issue. And we have had several positive responses, yet many have refused to do right by students or have not at all replied:

- IQ Student Accommodation agreed that students could break their contracts and be refunded for term 3 rents.
- Abodus Student Living who run Hollingbury House has also agreed to allow students to break their contracts fee-free and will refund their term 3 rents.
- Co-Apt have said they are willing to discuss individual requests with their tenants and work with students and landlords to come to an arrangement.
- Deborah Webb in Brighton has arranged with her tenants to pay 50% for the remaining period.
- G4 lets have responded saying that they will discuss individual cases with tenants and landlords and can arrange for payment deferrals where students cannot afford the fees but any deferred payments must be paid up to date by the end of the tenancy.
- Q Estate Agents have replied saying they are happy to negotiate with tenants and landlords individually to help find a solution where students are in financial hardship. They have already made arrangements for some students and are working with landlords to insert a clause allowing students out of upcoming tenancies.
- Ann and Ralph Thompson from Eastbourne have reduced rents for April, May and June by 50% and are waiving rents for July and August.

In addition, MPs Lloyd Russell-Moyle (Brighton Kemptown, who has [written](#) on our behalf), Caroline Lucas (Brighton Pavilion) and Peter Kyle (Hove) are all supporting our campaign and calls for action and have signed a letter to the Minister for Housing asking them to enable students to break their contracts without a fee. Paul Blomfield has [written](#) to the Minister of State for Universities regarding this matter. We are immensely grateful to Councillor Gill Williams for the support she has offered as well. It has been incredibly valuable, and it deeply appreciated by the thousands of students we represent. Students, who are the very heart of this campaign, have also been directly lobbying providers and landlord through [resources](#) we have developed for them to use. Our [petition](#) to the Minister for Housing and Minister for Universities has nearly 1,500 signatures. As you can see from the engagement with our social media updates on the campaign, this is an urgent priority for our students. They are counting on your support.



