Covid-19 Housing Advice

We know that many students are facing uncertainties around housing, so we have prepared this advice sheet to offer you guidance about your rights and responsibilities.

Please be aware that the situation is continually evolving and we are working to ensure this advice sheet is kept as up-to-date as possible.

If you have any questions about your tenancy rights, please do get in touch with the Advice Centre who will be able to help you.

University Halls

The University have announced that they are giving you the option to terminate your halls contract early.

This means that if you are not planning on coming back to campus to use your room and you have paid for your accommodation upfront, you can get the third term money refunded. For those who pay in instalments, if you opt out of the contract, then you will not need to make the third term payment. In order to request the termination of your contract you should contact customerservices@rhul.ac.uk. The deadline for this is 27 April 2020.

The University recognises that with the current government restrictions in place, you will not be able to collect any belongings you may have left but this will not impact your ability to terminate your contract for term three. You should notify Customer Services of the fact that you have left belongings in your room at the time you terminate your contract and they will get back in touch to provide you with more information on storage options.

Private Halls

The Pad and Podium have confirmed that they will be releasing students from their tenancies early. The only site yet to do this is Hox Park. The Sabbatical Officers are trying to address this issue and have been putting pressure on Hox Park to release students from their contracts.

For all those living in The Pad or Podium, whether you remain there or have moved out, you have to inform them of your decision by 9 April 2020, by sending an email to rents.uk@scape.com. Within this email, you need to outline what your intentions are along with your full name, building and room number – you should also detail if you have any remaining possessions in your room or not.
Private Rented Housing FAQs

For those of you living in privately owned accommodation, we have compiled the following most frequently asked questions as a guide regarding your tenancy.

1. I don't live in my student home anymore, but my friends are still expecting me to pay towards the bills. Do I have to pay?

In most cases, yes, because most students are in a jointly and severally liable contract. You should also consider that most of the bills are fixed and you agreed to split them equally when you took up the contract and so everyone has budgeted accordingly. It's not fair to expect people to suddenly start paying more.

2. Some of our housemates have moved back home and are expecting those who remained behind to cover all the bills from now on. What can we do?

Firstly, contact the suppliers you owe money to and let them know that you need some extra time to pay due to the Covid-19 situation. They should be understanding for the next three months at least. Then, share your contract with the SU Advice Centre, asking them to highlight the parts that require your housemates to contribute towards the bills. You can then show this to your housemates and politely explain to them that they can have more time to pay if they need, but that the contract requires them to pay towards the bills.

3. How do I ask my landlord if they will release me from my contract?

The best thing to do is send a polite email, to give them time to consider it. You can adapt our template email here.

4. The landlord says they want to help but the agency won't let them release us from the contract.

Our Advice Centre can send an email to your landlord reassuring them that they have the power to release you and signposting them to some advice about help available to them.

5. The landlord won’t let us out of the contract and we can’t afford to pay. What will happen next?

The landlord can’t take any action against you for the next few months. The best thing to do is keep them updated on how much you can pay and when, and keep making payments towards the rent you owe. Currently, the government guidance is that landlords can continue to charge you rent, but they have to be flexible about payments. You can adapt our template email here.
6. The landlord says we have to move because a new set of tenants have signed a contract starting soon. Do we have to move?

No. You can refuse to move and you cannot be evicted before the end of June. Do get legal advice from University of London Housing Services though, so you know all your rights.

7. Can I move home now?

For most people, the answer is ‘no,’ but there are some exceptions, so please get in touch with our Advice Centre for guidance or check government guidance. The government’s stay at home guidance makes it clear that people should stay in their homes for the next three weeks except in very limited circumstances.

Additional guidance on moving home during the coronavirus outbreak says that homeowners and renters should follow public health advice and delay the move where possible.

This guidance has more information for homeowners who were due to move.

If you're renting privately and planned to move during this time, you'll probably need to:

- Postpone the move
- Negotiate with both your old and new landlord regarding the start and end dates of both tenancies

**Your current tenancy will usually continue as a periodic tenancy** if your fixed term contract ends as long as you still live there.

Landlords, agents and tenants will need to work together and show goodwill in order to comply with the public health guidance over the coming weeks.

8. Can my letting agent still go ahead with visits and inspections?

Your agent should postpone all non-essential visits such as:

- routine tenancy inspections
- **viewings towards the end of your tenancy**

Tell your agent you can't allow access to your home at the moment because of government coronavirus guidance.
9. Can my landlord evict me straight away because of coronavirus?

No, this would be illegal. Illegal eviction is a criminal offence - coronavirus doesn't change this.

It’s likely to be an illegal eviction if your landlord:

- makes you leave without notice or a court order
- locks you out of your home, even temporarily

You can get help from the council or the court if your landlord prevents you accessing your home.

10. What if I live with my landlord?

Your landlord still needs to follow the correct process. They don't need to go to court but you're usually entitled to reasonable notice before you can be made to leave. Ask the Advice Centre for help if you're worried about this.

11. What do the new rules on eviction mean?

The new rules do two things:

- extend the notice period for evictions
- suspend eviction court action

All court proceedings for eviction are on hold until at least 25 June 2020, regardless of when your landlord applied to court. This means most tenants can't be evicted before the end of June at the earliest. You should stay in your home if your landlord gives you notice or asks you to leave.

12. How much notice does the landlord have to give me if they want to evict me?

Most tenants will get three months' notice before their landlord can apply to court. This applies if you get notice on or after 26 March 2020.

13. What if my landlord gave me an eviction notice before 26 March?

You should stay in your home. You don't have to leave at the end of your notice. It is your legal right to stay until your landlord gets a court order and a bailiff's warrant. They can't do this at the moment because court action for eviction is on hold.

Find out more about the eviction process if you are a:

- private renter
- council or housing association tenant
14. I'm worried about rent arrears. What should I do?

Speak to your landlord if you're struggling to pay rent. They could be sympathetic, especially if you've lost your job or seen your income reduce suddenly. They might agree to a rent reduction or to accept rent late. Get any agreement in writing.

“Buy to let” landlords may get mortgage payment holidays if their tenants have financial problems due to coronavirus. Your landlord's mortgage payments will normally increase after a payment holiday. Also get in touch with the Financial Wellbeing team at the University to see what help is available to you.

Find out more about how to deal with rent arrears.

15. What if I'm struggling to pay the gas and electricity bills?

Speak to your energy supplier if you're struggling financially or in arrears with gas or electricity bills. You could get support including:

- reduced bills or debt repayments
- a temporary break in your bills or debt arrangements

If you have a pre-payment meter they may be able to, for example:

- arrange for someone else to top up your meter
- add credit to your account automatically
- send you a pre-loaded top up card

You may need to leave your meter box unlocked if you need someone else to top it up. Disconnections of pre-payment meters are suspended.

You can also get in touch with the Financial Wellbeing team at the University to see what help is available either through a Study Support Grant or Short Term Loan Support.

16. Can I get emergency help with food?

If you live near the Egham campus, the Advice Centre can refer you for Food Bank Vouchers during working hours. If you don’t live locally, then you can contact your local food bank if you need help with food. If you regularly use a food bank, contact them if possible to check if there are any changes to their service.

You can search for your local food bank and find out about support available during the coronavirus outbreak on the Trussell Trust website.
17. **What if I need repairs or a gas safety check is due?**

Landlords have the same responsibilities for repairs during the coronavirus outbreak. You should report repairs by phone, email or online.

They might not be able to get the problem fixed during the usual timescales but shouldn't delay repairs unreasonably.

*Annual gas safety checks* remain an important legal requirement. Your landlord should rearrange any gas safety checks that are booked in over the next three weeks if they cannot go ahead safely. Further guidance is expected from the Gas Safe Register.

Read about [access to your rented home for repairs](#).

18. **Where can I go for other sources of help?**

- The Students’ Union Advice Centre is available by email and phone to offer specific support with your housing issues.
  
  [advice@su.rhul.ac.uk](mailto:advice@su.rhul.ac.uk)
  
  [su.rhul.ac.uk/advice/housing](http://su.rhul.ac.uk/advice/housing)

- Shelter offers advice and information about housing
  
  [england.shelter.org.uk](http://england.shelter.org.uk)

- University of London Housing Service
  
  [housing.london.ac.uk](http://housing.london.ac.uk)