



Briefing note to registered providers March 2020

Introduction

Following our recent communication out to all registered providers we thought it would be useful to provide you with a briefing note to keep you posted about what is happening in the sector and feedback from other providers following the short survey.

You will be aware that LSH's team have been working remotely from the central office. Other than the office location the transition has been seamless and we have continued to offer the support and guidance to both our registered providers and students.

Feedback from registered providers

We have recently sent a short set of questions to our registered providers to capture how the market is performing under the current circumstances. In this we wanted to gain a greater understanding of how many students were still residing in your accommodation and how that looked in your area. We asked you a couple of short questions and here is a summary of the responses:

1 Student wishing to leave your accommodation early:

What has been the response like in your accommodation? Have students left your accommodation?

Really mixed response across the sector but generally students have remained in accommodation to date.

What percentage of students do you have remaining?

Larger portfolio agents/landlords and developments are suggesting occupancy rate between 20-70%.

Have students attempted to recover accommodation costs for the time they are not here?

Feedback suggests that students have approached providers in respect of rent remaining. The general consensus is that providers are referring students back to the existing tenancy agreement which is in place. LSH have picked up a lot of enquiries generated following the notification issued by the University of Liverpool in respect of the owned halls and license agreements. The University issued a statement detailing that first-year occupants of University owned halls would not be liable for the third semester rent payment if they did not reside in the building.

As we write this document the situation remains very fluid with larger providers changing their stance on daily basis. We are aware of a growing number of private halls, who have taken the business decision to reduce reputational damage to notify tenants that their last semester rent will not be payable.

In other feedback traditional landlords/agents with properties have indicated that they will be willing to refund charges levied for utility bills when a houses/flat has been vacated.

There is no directive in respect of what you should do in these circumstances. The decision with regards to best practice in these circumstances will be in line with an individual landlords/agents circumstances.

Our message to students contacting the service remains the same that they should refer to the existing tenancy agreement terms and contact their named landlord/agent/provider for further guidance on the current position.

A number of landlords have advised us they are reaching negotiated compromises such as not charging the full remaining rent or refunding the utilities element of the rent. In addition, a number of landlords have agreed a more flexible payment plan and allowed for rent to be paid over a longer period

2 Larger Private Developments:

Have you been approached to offer your accommodation for emergency use (e.g. NHS Key Workers etc)?

At the time of writing the private developments in the city have not been approached to provide accommodation to NHS key workers. This may fall to the University of Liverpool if required due to the close proximity of some of the owned halls.

Information to students

Communication has been ongoing via social media and updates on the LSH website homepage. An advert on the homepage 'Coronavirus-keeping safe' will direct students to some basic guidance. We have been pushing out messages in relation to students communicating with housemates and their accommodation provider on issues such as whether they are leaving or staying and if they are experiencing symptoms.

With strengthened steps taken by the government in relation to social isolation it is important that we seek to support students who may be vulnerable and struggling with the measures in place.

Things to consider

We are all in uncharted water responding to the current Pandemic. Various issues emerge on a day by day basis but as we head into tighter restrictions we wanted to bring to the forefront a couple of things to consider:

- Compliance with legal obligations in respect of Gas Safety checks, it is important that you follow the Covid-19 Pandemic Guidance provided by Gas Safe:
<https://www.gassaferegister.co.uk/help-and-advice/covid-19-advice-and-guidance/>
This will provide you with the guidance you need in terms of compliance. We will be sending out separate email communication around gas safety certs and adverts.

- If your tenants are still living in your accommodation have you fully communicated with them how things will continue to work from your end. This may cover things like repairs, safety issues – are you all clear on how this will look in your area?
- Reduction in key staff or access to supporting services – do you have a contingency in place to cover all bases?
- Developing regular communication lines with your tenants – how to best get a message to them quickly
- Forward planning – what do the next few months look like for you? What plans are you considering when students are due to move out? Returning keys, clearing properties etc. We don't know where we will be in three months' time but we do know there will need to be a process in place for dealing with these sorts of procedures. Additionally, what plans are you considering for new tenancies that are due to commence for the next academic year?
- Do any properties which you own or manage run off pre-payment meters? Try to ensure that there is sufficient credit to allow burglar alarms and other electrical dependent systems to stay effective if the property is empty