

Minister Deirdre Hargey,
Room 260,
Parliament Buildings,
Stormont,
Belfast BT4 3XX

1st April 2020

Dear Minister Hargey,



Covid-19 Private Renters Survey

Renters' Voice is a new project for people who rent privately in Northern Ireland to build a strong voice and influence landlords, politicians and government. We are supported by Housing Rights and funded by Nationwide Foundation.

Between Saturday 21st and Wednesday 25th March, we conducted a survey of private renters in Northern Ireland about their issues and concerns due to Covid-19 (or Coronavirus) and what measures they feel would be of help as a result.

94 people responded:

Almost three quarters said they had a concern about their **ability to pay their rent** due to the impact of Covid-19.

Over one third said they had **lost employment** and **over half** of those who have lost their work were **self-employed, freelance or agency workers**.

People who responded were in favour of a range of financial or practical measures that might help, with the highest numbers saying that they could benefit from **increases to benefits**, an **emergency 'Universal Basic Income'** or a **temporary reduction or break from rent** (if there would not be an expectation to pay this back later).

7 in 10 also said that they could benefit from **information and advice about rights as a private tenant during the Covid-19 crisis**.

Please find our report with the full survey findings attached and here are some further points that we would like to emphasise for your consideration:

- The problems caused for private renters by this crisis show that many people who rent are starting the Coronavirus crisis from a very poor baseline of existing problems because the private rented sector needs to be professionalised and strengthened.
- One of the reasons for this is that proposals for reform of the Private Rented Sector that were made in 2016 have not yet become law.
- Uncertainty is a major issue for people at this time and even before this crisis, the private rental sector offers lower levels of protection and security than either home ownership or social housing.
- **There needs to be more customised and tailored support, including financial support, for people in different and diverse situations – for example, those in receipt of benefits, the newly unemployed, people who are self-employed and those on low pay.**
- It can be the little things that make life so much harder, for instance, you may not be able to get to a cheaper supermarket, because there is none in your neighbourhood, so you spent more money on groceries. If you are single parent, it is really hard to go out shopping if you have more than one child - and if you have nobody else to go shopping for you at a larger supermarket, you rush to the nearest - and dearest shop.
- Private tenants may also move more often than people in the other housing sectors and so have a shorter or not well-established relationship with neighbours, at a time when neighbourhood support is crucial for help as needed.
- Landlords may need help from the Department for Communities around how they can help people with issues such as their mental health at this time.
- The Department for Communities could write to landlords to help them with the options that are available e.g. about how they could offer a temporary pause of monthly rent – some landlords may be able to offer this easily if they do not rely on the income from the property that they rent but others are another group who are potentially at risk, for example those in negative equity.
- Could there be guidelines from the Minister or the Department for Communities to landlords and letting agents as to how to deal with various elements and problems arising and likely to arise during the crisis, and where they can find support (including via the Housing Rights helpline for landlords) or even a template letter for letting agents and landlords to send to their tenants?
- One major overarching issue however is that, as a private renter, you are entirely dependent, now and as always, on whether your landlord or letting agent is a 'good' one or not. Whilst some people have mentioned how nice their landlord has been, not everyone is this lucky. This shouldn't matter, people's ability to be in secure housing shouldn't rely on a landlord's goodwill and there should be legal obligations compelling this.
- **There should be no evictions – as well as the major impact these would have on people who were evicted at this time of crisis, this is a public health issue. Where do people go if they are evicted and are supposed to stay at home? People being evicted would put everyone at risk right now.**
- **We welcome the announcement that there will be no court proceedings to enforce evictions but we do not think this goes far enough and would further welcome**

- **Guidance from the Department for Communities to landlords, letting agents and tenants about leases being extended to cover the period of lockdown and beyond, until tenants can look for, view and move to new properties.**
 - **Following a similar approach to the Republic of Ireland and prohibiting Notice to Quit being issued at all.**
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- In addition to the health issues highlighted by the survey, there is a further health issue around keeping tenants safe - will there be guidance issued on landlords or letting agents carrying out routine gas, carbon monoxide checks, or necessary repair work? As failure to make repairs and the poor health and safety conditions of many properties are an ongoing problem within the private rented sector, the baseline before the Covid-19 crisis was already low.
 - Some letting agents have said they can carry out emergency repairs only but are still requiring payment of full rent.
 - Tenants also face being stuck in houses with a lot of problems without the option to move when their contracts are up, with further impact on their mental and physical health.
 - Taking account of the significant issues people are facing due to this crisis, will the need for landlords, letting agents and tenants to have an agreed emergency code of practice be looked at?

We ask that serious consideration is given to these survey findings and additional points when looking at measures that will help private tenants in the current crisis and beyond. In particular, we ask that stronger measures are put in place to prevent evictions at this time and to provide financial support to meet peoples' different circumstances.

The best way to contact us at present is via email: rentersvoice@housingrights.org.uk.

Yours sincerely,

Renters' Voice

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