

Government sets out comprehensive support for renters this winter

- Emergency legislation has increased notice periods to 6 months until at least the end of March 2021
- Evictions will not be enforced in local lockdown areas and there will be a truce on enforcement over Christmas
- £180 million of government funding for Discretionary Housing Payments available for local authorities to support vulnerable renters this year

Renters affected by coronavirus will continue to be supported over autumn and winter through comprehensive measures confirmed today (10 September 2020) by Housing Secretary Robert Jenrick.

The government has changed the law to increase notice periods to 6 months meaning renters now served notice can stay in their homes over winter, with time to find alternative support or accommodation.

The only exceptions to this are the most egregious cases, including where tenants have demonstrated anti-social behaviour or committed fraud, and the landlord rightly would like to re-let their property to another tenant.

The Housing Secretary has also today confirmed that with coronavirus still posing a risk, if an area is in a local lockdown that includes a restriction on gathering in homes, evictions will not be enforced by bailiffs.

This support builds on the unprecedented package the government has put in place to help communities through the pandemic, including support for businesses to pay staff salaries and strengthening the welfare safety-net with a nearly £9.3 billion boost to the welfare system. This includes an extra £1 billion to increase Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates so that they cover the lowest 30% of market rents, meaning we now spend £25 billion supporting households to meet the cost of rent in the private and social rented sectors.

For those renters who require additional support, there is an existing £180 million of government funding for Discretionary Housing Payments made available this year, an increase of £40 million from last year and which is for councils to distribute to support renters with housing costs.

We will keep these measures under constant review and our decisions will continue to be guided by the latest public health advice and support with housing costs may also be available for those on low incomes or who are out of work eligible for Universal Credit.

No landlord, including those who only rent out a single property, has had access to the courts since March, including to regain possession in cases where the tenant has broken the law. So it is right that landlords are able

to access justice, alongside measure to protect the vulnerable. The government would like to thank landlords for their forbearance during this difficult time.

From 21 September courts will start to hear possession hearings again. When cases are heard again these will be subject to new court processes and procedures which the Judiciary have developed. These include:

- The prioritisation of cases, such as those involving anti-social behaviour and other crimes, as well as extreme rent arrears where landlords would otherwise face unmanageable debts.
- No cases from before 3 August 2020 will immediately proceed to hearing, but will have to be 're-activated' by the landlord and then subject to a new review hearing, at least four weeks before the substantive hearing.
- Landlords will also need to provide the courts and Judges with information on how tenants have been affected by the pandemic. Where this information is not provided, judges will be able to adjourn proceedings until the information is provided.

There will also be a 'winter truce' on the enforcement of evictions, with no evictions permitted in England and Wales in the run up to and over Christmas except in the most serious circumstances, such as cases involving anti-social behaviour or domestic abuse. This will ensure vulnerable tenants are not forced from their homes at a time when public and local authorities may be dealing with the usual level of increased demand for services during this time. To achieve this, guidance will be issued to bailiffs that they should not enforce possession orders in the weeks of Christmas.

Housing Secretary Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP said:

We have protected renters during the pandemic by banning evictions for 6 months – the longest eviction ban in the UK. To further support renters we have increased notice periods to 6 months, an unprecedented measure to help keep people in their homes over the winter months.

It's right that we strike a balance between protecting vulnerable renters and ensuring landlords whose tenants have behaved in illegal or anti-social ways have access to justice. Our legislation means such cases will be subject to shorter notice periods and then prioritised through the judiciary's new court processes.

The government has taken unprecedented action to support renters during the pandemic, preventing people getting into financial hardship and helping businesses to pay salaries.

The vast majority of landlords have shown understanding and leadership, taking action to support tenants despite facing hardship themselves. According to independent research, 87% of tenants have continued to pay full rent since the start of the pandemic, with a further 8% agreeing reduced fees with their landlords.

The government is committed to striking the right balance in the relationship between landlords and tenants and new guidance will be published before the stay on possession proceedings ends to help both understand their rights under the court system and the financial support available.

Restarting possession proceedings is an important step towards transitioning out of emergency measures and allowing the market to operate while ensuring people have appropriate access to justice.

The stay on possession proceedings was introduced at the end of March in response to the pandemic in order to protect public health. The stay was extended in June and was due to expire on 23 August 2020. On 21 August, this stay on proceedings was extended for a further month, bringing the suspension to a total of six months. No action to evict a tenant will proceed in the courts before 21 September 2020.

Where tenants do experience financial difficulties as a result of the pandemic, the government is clear that landlords and tenants should work together and exhaust all possible options – such as flexible payment plans which take into account a tenant's individual circumstances – to ensure cases only end up in court as an absolute last resort.

We are very conscious of the pressure on landlords and do not want to exacerbate this. It is important to stress that tenants who are able to do so must continue to pay their rent.

We also understand that there are some cases where it is right that landlords should be able to start progressing cases quicker, because of the pressure they place on landlords, other tenants and local communities.

Therefore, notice periods for the most serious circumstances have been shortened. From 29 August, notice periods must be at least 4 weeks where over six months of rent is due (if less than 6 months is owed, then 6 months' notice must be given).