



Richard Lochhead MSP
Minister for Further Education, Higher Education, and Science
Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh, EH99 1SP

29 September 2020

Dear Richard,

Urgent: students in halls of residence

I am writing with regards to the situation faced by many students in halls of residence across the country. It is now clear that the decision to resume term-time student accommodation arrangements in a normal manner has made a significant contribution to the second wave in cases of coronavirus we are now experiencing nationwide. Given the situation in which we now find ourselves, the Scottish Greens would like to propose an emergency relief package, the details of which I have outlined below.

As I am sure you can acknowledge, the living arrangements in many halls of residence are simply not compatible with suppressing this virus. In many cases up to 12 students share one kitchen and bathroom facilities, far more than in an average household. While I do not excuse poor behaviour by students or any other group, (though I note reports that only one in ten house parties recently broken up by the police were in student flats), I believe that the reality of 'normal' student living arrangements is the primary material concern which should be addressed.

The experience of students in halls across the country where outbreaks have taken place in recent weeks has raised further issues which must be addressed with urgency. Some universities have simply not been quick enough to put support packages in place, with reports now emerging of students locked down without adequate access to food or other essential items. I am also aware of reports of attempts to prevent students from exercising their rights under the Coronavirus No. 2 Act to terminate their tenancies, including claims that students cannot cancel while still being a student at the university.

Having students, many of whom have left home for the first time, confined to tiny bedrooms and extremely limited common areas places a significant burden on their mental health in particular and I am extremely concerned that they are being provided with inadequate mental health by their universities.

In light of the above, the Scottish Greens are calling on the Scottish Government to take the following actions.

1. Guaranteed provision of essentials for students in lockdown

The Scottish Government should work with universities and halls providers to ensure that all students in lockdown are given direct support, including ensuring they have adequate

supplies of food, toiletries, and other essential items, following the example set by Glasgow University this past weekend. This was achieved for a far greater number of shielding households for a far longer period of time, so it is clearly logistically feasible for student residences over two-week periods.

2. Guaranteed mental health support

Access to counselling and mental health support should be guaranteed for all students. In the first instance this is the responsibility of their university but the Scottish Government has a responsibility for the health and wellbeing of all residents and so should ensure that each university's provision is adequate, intervening where this is not the case. Particular attention must also be given to ensuring support is available to students who have left home for the first time and for international students who have just moved to Scotland.

3. Ensure online teaching is the default for this academic year

The Scottish Government should work with universities and higher education unions to establish online teaching as the norm wherever possible. Students must be given clarity over how their classes will be held throughout the 20/21 academic year, allowing them to make decisions about their living arrangements with the knowledge of how it may affect their studies. The UCU have already called for teaching to move online and this is now the case in most instances, but inconsistencies remain across the country.

4. Establish a no-detriment policy for students leaving halls

Many students planning to leave their halls are worried about how they will attend future classes, particularly if there is a move towards in-person teaching later on in this academic year. The Scottish Government should work with universities to agree a no-detriment policy whereby any student who returns home to continue their classes online is not later penalised for being unable to attend university in person.

5. Provide clear guidance to students on their tenancy rights

Many students who have left home for the first time are now faced with having to exercise their tenancy rights in a highly stressful situation, including against universities and halls providers who have been reluctant to allow students to leave. The Government should work with tenants' organisations and students' associations to establish clear guidance and information for students on their tenancy rights, including the right to cancel their halls of residence tenancies, provided for under the Coronavirus No. 2 (Scotland) Act following discussions between myself and the Housing minister, Kevin Stewart. The provisions of the Act do not cover situations whereby a student may wish to leave their accommodation for a

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prolonged period but return at a later point in the year. The Scottish Government should also work to agree a national policy with accommodation providers to make this possible without students incurring substantial costs for accommodation which they are not using.

6. Access to testing for staff & for students wishing to return home

The widespread outbreaks in student halls underlines the need for easily accessible testing, including on-demand tests and walk-in centres. Many students who intend to leave halls are also worried about potentially bringing the virus home, particularly those who have vulnerable family members. Access to testing, including walk-in sites, is necessary to ensure transmission among students can be caught early and outbreaks brought under control. Any student, regardless of symptoms or previous contact with positive cases, should be able to access testing. This should not negate the need to self-isolate, either in halls or on returning home however.

7. Manage the number of students remaining in halls and returning home

Given the problems with transmission associated with up to 12 students sharing cooking, cleaning and recreational facilities, there are clear benefits to reducing the overall number of students in halls, allowing smaller groups to live together. However, as students return home, they must be supported to do so in a manner that minimises the risk of transmission of the virus outside of university halls. The above measures on testing are a key part of this. The Scottish Government should develop an action plan in collaboration with universities and students associations to manage the reduction in the students halls population whilst minimising the risk of transmission into the wider community from those returning home.

I look forward to your response.

Kind regards

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Ross Greer', with a stylized flourish at the end.

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