

Responding to rent strike

10 May 2021

Introduction

During academic year 2020/21, students from Goldsmiths, University of London who are living in halls of residence used by Goldsmiths students joined together to form the Goldsmiths Rent Strike group.

This group has raised a number of issues for the College to consider regarding accommodation which is managed by Goldsmiths and accommodation which is managed by third-party providers.

This document sets out the issues raised by Goldsmiths Rent Strike which directly relate to accommodation as well as broader requests made by the group.

Context

Academic year 2020/21 has taken place through the global Covid-19 pandemic, with significant impact on the previous academic year. Goldsmiths appreciates that this has been an incredibly difficult time for our students and throughout the pandemic the College has looked to provide the best support possible.

On accommodation, Goldsmiths spent £2.8m on covering accommodation fees for students in halls in academic year 2019/20 and has set aside an additional £1.1m this academic year to go towards accommodation fees for those students in halls accommodation managed by Goldsmiths, or its nomination partners, and who have been unable to use their rooms due to Covid-19 restrictions. We have also launched a range of new funds, bursaries and initiatives to provide additional support.

Our Warden, Professor Frances Corner, has also written to the Universities Minister asking the Government to offer more financial support to students including making additional student hardship funding available and writing-off this year's tuition loans.

Setting out issues raised – and Goldsmiths' response

No repercussions for rent strikers and guaranteed safety for international students

Steps already taken

International students have been supported throughout their stay in the accommodation. Work is already underway on supporting those students further who may have returned home for Christmas and now face difficulties in returning for their studies because of additional testing or quarantine requirements. We are offering students the opportunity to apply for additional funds to bridge the gaps. A message went out to international students reiterating this support on 12th March and further updates provided ahead of the 12th April and 17th May government milestones with regard to easing of restrictions.

Students declaring themselves as in the rent strike group will continue to be liable for rental payment with the expectation that monies owed will be paid as per the contract but none of these students will face the final step of the process, which would normally signal a Notice to Quit.

Proposal to satisfy demand

No student declaring themselves in the rent strike will be issued a Notice to Quit to vacate their accommodation. However, monies owed would still be paid as per the contract.

A 50% rent reduction for the remainder of the academic year 2020/2021 as well as a guarantee of no pay cuts and no job losses for staff

Steps already taken

Any student whose programme is now wholly online has been/will be offered release.

Students who elect modules which have now placed their programme as wholly online for the remainder of the academic year will be offered a release.

These actions will significantly reduce the contractual amounts owed per student.

Similarly, students who have not been able to use their accommodation because of government guidance surrounding returning to campus will be credited 100% for the time they have been unable to use the room between 1st Jan – 17th May currently.

This offering has been continually extended as the situation progressed in-line with the rest of the sector.

Proposal to satisfy demand

Students who demonstrate that they will have no further in-person teaching will be allowed to be released from the remainder of the agreement from the point that the evidence is supplied to Accommodation Services. This may also include the 'assessment period' should the resident wish to vacate their rooms.

However, due to government lockdown rules regarding travel and forming new households, a student who has remained in their room up to 12th April, will not be granted an early release to vacate their room before 17th May.

Students who have not returned to their accommodation since Christmas have been offered the opportunity to apply for a rent credit for 100% of the costs since they have not been able to use the accommodation.

Offer all students no-penalty early withdrawal from their tenancy contracts for both this and the next academic years

Steps already taken

Work already undertaken is as set out above.

Proposal to satisfy demand

Regarding tenancies, the above information applies.

Goldsmiths will not be using a single blanket approach to rental contract releases ahead of any student agreeing to the 21/22 contractual terms if they have applied for accommodation in the 21/22 academic year.

Should applicants to the accommodation not wish to take up a contract, they will have no obligation to do so once offered a room ahead of the 21/22 cycle.

Immediate removal of sexual violence perpetrators from halls of residence.

Steps already taken

Colleagues from across the institution already form a Triage Group, which reviews on a weekly basis any new or existing reports of sexual violence, harassment or inappropriate behaviour. The group is drawn from four parts of the College – Student Support Services, HR, Complaints/Conduct and an independent member – meaning that all decisions are informed based on position, expertise and balance of options and outcomes. Submissions will be assessed and balanced on a case-by-case basis, some

of which may lead to a formal investigation against any named person in those reports. However, not all investigations will yield the same outcome.

We can, however, confirm that in numerous instances since this group began, a decision has been taken to either remove an alleged perpetrator from the environment and/or liaised with the reporting party regarding their preferences on a room swap or a contract release in some cases.

There is not a one-size fits all approach to this issue.

Proposal to satisfy demand

Goldsmiths wishes to re-enforce its commitment to continue the work around sexual violence and harassment on campus or accommodation settings.

Based on feedback, we are already looking at ensuring that the communication aspect between the reporting party and the Triage Group is improved and streamlined.

Goldsmiths also in discussions with Culture Shift (the suppliers of the Report and Support tool) to ensure that the information contained on the system following submission of a report and the expectations about what happens next are made clearer to a student, visitor or member of staff as part of the process of making a report.

Immediate action against racism on campus. Including anti-racist training for students and staff members and setting up a new complaints procedure (following GARA - Goldsmiths Anti Racist Action demands) as well as increased access to student support to ensure the safety and well-being of black and brown people on campus

Steps already taken

GARA commitments already agreed: <https://www.gold.ac.uk/racial-justice/commitments/>

Proposal to satisfy demand

GARA commitments already agreed.

Maintenance responses to problems in halls of residence to be within 24 hours

Steps already taken

Maintenance issues logged on the providers' systems are addressed in line with the relevant Code of Practice for Student Accommodation. These Service Level Agreements refer to time taken to review the problem, not necessarily to address it fully. This is because mechanical parts may be required or contractor intervention.

There is a commitment from all providers since this group formed that outstanding issues will be addressed as soon as possible.

Proposal to satisfy demand

Maintenance requests/issues may occur from time-to-time. CLV and Goldsmiths have reiterated to residents how to make a maintenance request and how to monitor its progress.

More work needs to be done in improving the communication aspect once maintenance jobs are attended to or addressed. This is an ongoing continual improvement exercise to ensure that the information attached to the job attendance/closure makes sense to residents.

Goldsmiths agrees to address this with providers and internal teams to ensure that communication on the respective systems is improved to match the SLAs.

Increased support for isolating students with food boxes, daily access to outside spaces, communication about Covid cases with students and staff and daily check-ins from the well-being team

Steps already taken

Students in university accommodation and beyond have been provided with the relevant Covid-19 information as it has changed from the government. At the beginning of the year, much of this guidance was not embedded in law, meaning that some of it was 'advisory' and some of it was 'law'. Goldsmiths was committed to helping students to digest this ever-changing information.

As the academic year has progressed, the laws on isolation, quarantine and socialising have become progressively harsher in terms of fines to individuals. On occasion, other residents have called authorities to investigate issues pertaining to contraventions, however, due to Goldsmiths' operational rules, the authorities, to date, have not intervened beyond our procedures.

When cases regarding Covid-19 began to increase, we issued communications to those in that hall and published information on number of cases on the Goldsmiths website. Since November until the end of April, no student had declared self-isolation or a contraction of Covid-19, so there has been no need to communicate a situation change with regard to infections on site or across campus. This is to ensure that only important changes are communicated and reduces impact on student mental health and anxiety.

When residents in student and private accommodation began to isolate because of a confirmed cases of Covid-19 or because of precautionary isolation, increased resources into the Accommodation Services and Wellbeing Teams were provided. This was to ensure that students were checked in on throughout this period of time and that we could respond to food deliveries directly to students' rooms and ensuring that the relevant support mechanisms are in place overnight and out of regular office hours.

Proposal to satisfy demand

Students who live in halls and private accommodation have been reminded of the tools to report self-isolation and a diagnosis of Covid-19 so that we may support them with check-ins.

There has been an extension to the resource outlined above until 31st July 2021 to ensure that Accommodation Services and Wellbeing Teams are appropriately prepared for any spike in cases, isolation or quarantine should students return to the UK from abroad.

Increased resources for the wellbeing team and increased access to counselling

Steps already taken

In Term 1, teams were appropriately resourced to offer support to students.

When residents in student and private accommodation began to isolate because of a confirmed case of Covid-19 or because of precautionary isolation, increased resources into the Accommodation Services and Wellbeing Teams were granted. This was to ensure that students were checked in on throughout this period of time and that we could respond to food deliveries directly to students' rooms.

Proposal to satisfy demand

Locum (temporary) Counsellors have now been recruited to address the Term 2 increased waitlist for counselling, which is now at minimal wait levels of between 2 – 3 weeks to be assessed for counselling.

Wellbeing services are responding to students daily and Campus Support Officers have

capacity to support students during the evenings and weekends.

According to our statistical analysis of demand and footfall (both digital and in-person), Student Support Services is appropriately resourced to support students approaching the teams.

There is a monthly statistical review to ensure that the numbers requesting support match the capacity in the teams.

A commitment from Goldsmiths to end its contribution to the gentrification of the local area

Steps already taken

Goldsmiths understands the importance of this issue and our community critically engages with these challenges through our scholarship. We fully recognise the responsibility we have as an anchor institution in Lewisham to support and reflect our local communities while at the same time creating opportunity for those around us and making improvements to the environment and local area. For example, Goldsmiths' activities as a whole generate £91m for Lewisham and support 2,500 jobs in the borough. We know that in recent years the issue of student accommodation has been linked with the issue of gentrification across the UK and we always take into consideration the impact any new developments may have on our home borough of Lewisham.

Proposal to satisfy demand

Goldsmiths can confirm that no new agreements have been formed with housing providers for 21/22 and there are no such discussions currently taking place.

A public apology from Goldsmiths

Steps already taken

We accept that this has been an exceptionally difficult year for all students. However, we are confident that our practice has been acceptable and in line with other providers.

Proposal to satisfy demand

We accept there are areas in which we can improve and will continue to work to the best of our ability to satisfy the needs of the small minority of students in dispute with the College who live in accommodation owned or nominated by us.

Review of student communications regarding services available to students

Steps already taken

There is currently a review being undertaken on the communications to students as part of our accommodation offering this year.

Conversations are continually taking place about further ways of promoting support.

Proposal to satisfy demand

Student Support Services has committed to review wording on web and print media about the various intervention points available to students.

Update on progress on cultural competency/anti-racism training for staff and students

Steps already taken

GARA commitments already agreed.

Proposal to satisfy demand

Work to organise the training is currently being finalised by Human Resources department.

Clarification on the process for reporting cases of sexual violence and what happens from the Triage Team

Steps already taken

The website is currently being updated with further information on what happens when a report is received. This has been taken on board by the Triage Team and will be launched along with the new version of the Report and Support system.

Proposal to satisfy demand

As above.

Update on the review of the debt chase letters

Steps already taken

We review the wording of these letters yearly for accuracy and new information. We have committed to completing another review immediately.

Proposal to satisfy demand

This action has now been completed.

Update on early contract releases for those wishing to leave the accommodation earlier than the contract end date

Steps already taken

There is already a process for early departures because of wholly online provisions as mentioned above.

Proposal to satisfy demand

The process is outlined above.

Clarity on process to receive support for self-isolating students

Steps already taken

Students have received regular reminders by email about this guide, as mentioned above.

There is already a process to support students in self-isolation, whether from travel or symptomatic (or precautionary). This is laid out in information here:

<https://www.gold.ac.uk/staff-students/info/coronavirus/self-isolating/guidance>

Proposal to satisfy demand

As above.