Dear Grant Shapps,

I am writing to you as President of Hertfordshire Students’ Union to express concern about the impact that COVID-19 is having and will have on our students who currently rent private sector accommodation in the Welwyn Hatfield area.

Over the past couple of weeks, in light of Government advice, all teaching at the University of Hertfordshire has moved online, and as a result, many of our students have moved, or are seeking to move, home to their families and loved ones and resulting no longer require their student accommodation. In addition, many have lost the part-time work they relied upon to make ends meet, leaving them in a position where they’re no longer able to pay rent for the remainder of their lease.

We (the Students’ Union), like countless other individuals and institutions in their own domains across the country, have been working tirelessly to represent our students’ best interests at this time of global crisis, and now write to you for support in lobbying local accommodation providers on the issue of their rent. During what’s already an extremely difficult and uncertain period, they should not be burdened by such financial worry and pressure; indeed, their welfare should be the priority.

You will have seen that the University has already allowed students to end their University Accommodation contracts early with no release charge or future payments being taken, and are aware that you wrote to them asking for as much earlier this week – a sentiment we thank you for regardless of decisions on this front having already been made. Elsewhere, Unite Students and Liberty Living have also announced recently that students wishing to leave their residence(s) can end their contracts by notifying the provider, again with no outstanding rental payments to be charged.

Our attention now, however, turns to those students who are tied into contracts with private landlords, who we ask to receive the same consideration and good will as highlighted above. In a letter we have written to local accommodation providers, we have asked them for the following:

- To offer the option of a no-penalty release to those who are currently tied into contracts but have already left or wish to leave their property.

- To refund those who have already paid rent for the period forthcoming but have already left or wish to leave their property.
To ensure that full support is in place for students who wish to remain in their accommodation, in order that they are able to follow the Government’s advice and guidance with regards to self-isolation and staying at home.

To allow flexibility on payments and payment dates for students who wish to remain in their accommodation, but are unable to pay on time – flexibility that should also extend to those who are unable to go home due to travel restrictions, and would therefore have no choice but to stay beyond their contracted tenancy.

In writing to you, we are kindly asking whether you would be willing to lend your support to this as our local MP and help us achieve the best outcome for our students. Please also understand that we know this is a difficult time for all, and appreciate it will cause a burden for private landlords too, but given the circumstances, and our students’ long history of financial contribution to the local community and private sector housing market—and indeed, their anticipated continued contribution on the other side of these unprecedented times—we genuinely believe the request(s) we are making are reasonable.

Each and every one of us has a responsibility to support the global effort in beating this virus, and we can’t emphasise enough how much your support here would help our students’ own wellbeing throughout this period.

We hope you and those closest to you are keeping well and safe yourselves, and look forward to hearing back from you on this,

Yours sincerely,

Rida Shafqat
President (2019-2020)