



Coronavirus - Advice for tenants

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The current pandemic means there is concern for tenants, for many landlord agents and Council officers 'business as usual' is not possible. The situation is developing fast and it is vital that you keep up to date on the latest guidance from the Government and Public Health England.

This advice is aimed primarily at households renting from a private landlord. We have collated the most relevant information for tenants as available at the time of writing.

Remember the key message from the Government:



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COMMUNITY ACTION RESPONSE: COVID-19

5 things you can do to make a positive difference in your community



Reporting repairs

In many cases, routine inspections of properties will not be going ahead. Your landlord or agent might have specific instructions on how to report problems and the usual response times may be delayed.

Landlords in some cases may be unwilling to carry out work. There is no blanket ban on visits though, as in some cases the danger to the tenant may require a visit from the landlord, agent or a contractor.

The Government advises that inspectors or maintenance workers can still visit blocks of flats and multi-occupied properties for essential or urgent work. Urgent health and safety issues must still be dealt with, for example a leaking roof or a broken boiler. The guidance lists some further examples. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-and-renting-guidance-for-landlords-tenants-and-local-authorities>

Our usual policy in most cases is that tenants ought to have reported repairs to their landlord or agent in writing before we can pursue the matter. During the pandemic inspections by our officers are further restricted. Reactive cases are being assessed on a case by case basis, where possible using technology to obtain photos or videos in place of a visit.

Safety checks

We currently still expect to see annual gas safety checks carried out. See <https://www.gassaferegister.co.uk/help-and-advice/covid-19-advice-and-guidance/>

Similarly, other essential safety tasks required by law such as the annual inspection and test of the fire detection and emergency lighting systems and routine electrical safety inspections should be carried out where possible.

Visits from contractors

Where a contractor or the landlord is visiting you checks should be done first to see if anyone in the property is ill, self-isolating, or if shielding of a vulnerable person is in place. If safe to do so they can attend, making sure they are wearing appropriate protective equipment whilst observing social distancing where practical, keeping two metres apart, asking residents to stay in their room for the duration of the visit, handwashing or sanitizing and so on. More detailed advice can be found in the web links below.

Paying for energy

If you have a pre-payment meter and are unable to add credit due to the disruption caused by the coronavirus, contact your energy provider and discuss the options to keep your energy supply. Options include nominating a third party for credit top ups, having a discretionary fund added to your credit, or being sent a pre-loaded top up card.

If you do not have a pre-payment meter and are in financial difficulty, you should still contact your supplier for help. They may be able to reassess, reduce or pause bill and/or debt repayments.

What should I do if I think I may have the virus?

You should follow government guidance on self-isolation, which you can find here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance>

You should tell anyone you share the property with immediately, so that they can take appropriate action and make informed decisions regarding shared areas and access to the property. Current advice is that all other household members must stay at home and not leave the house for at least 14 days. Staying at home for 14 days will greatly reduce the risk of passing on infection to others in the community.

Seek prompt medical attention if your illness or the illness of anyone you live with is worsening. If it's not an emergency, contact NHS 111 online. If you have no internet access, you should call NHS 111. If it is an emergency and you need to call an ambulance, dial 999 and inform the call handler or operator that you or household have coronavirus (COVID-19) symptoms.

If you are living in accommodation which you share with other people, or share facilities with other people, you should follow current Public Health England guidance. Take particular care to follow the correct advice if you or others are in a vulnerable group. It may be appropriate for the vulnerable people in your house to move out, check the current advice.

If you are having to leave accommodation, you should seek alternative accommodation, or get in touch with our Homeless Prevention Team, who may be able to offer advice and assistance on housing options where someone in a HMO is classed as vulnerable such as those that are shielding. However please note that:

- Nobody can be removed from their home by their landlord because of the virus.
- Landlords are not obliged to provide alternative accommodation for tenants if others in the property contract the virus.

Advice on what to do if you are in a shared home with someone who may have the virus here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/stay-at-home-guidance-for-households-with-possible-coronavirus-covid-19-infection>

If toilet or bathroom facilities are shared, use a separate bathroom if possible. The bathroom should be cleaned and disinfected using regular cleaning products before being used by anyone else.

If a separate room is not available, consider drawing up a rota for washing or bathing, as well as use of kitchen facilities. The person who is unwell using the facilities last, before thoroughly cleaning the bathroom themselves (if they are able or it is appropriate). Any vulnerable person should use the facilities first, where possible.

Waste

If you have been confirmed to have coronavirus or suspect you may have, you should dispose of waste that is heavily contaminated - such as tissues and cleaning cloths - in a different way than usual:

- place the contaminated waste in a plastic bag or bin liner, tied securely
- place this bag in another bag and tie it securely
- store these bags separately from other waste for at least 72 hours before putting it in with your general rubbish for collection.

Cleaning

You can find Government guidance on cleaning your home to minimise the risk of infection here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-decontamination-in-non-healthcare-settings>

In many shared houses landlords have weekly or monthly cleaners. In some cases, these arrangements have stopped due to the pandemic, perhaps because of unavailability of staff or following a risk assessment. We recommend landlords look at alternative arrangements, which might involve them leaving cleaning products for tenants to use, in some cases.

Please be aware of good domestic hygiene, particularly in a shared house:

Reducing the spread of infection in your home

Do

- ✓ wash your hands with soap and water often, for at least 20 seconds
- ✓ use hand sanitiser gel if soap and water are not available
- ✓ cover your mouth and nose with a tissue or your sleeve (not your hands) when you cough or sneeze
- ✓ put used tissues in the bin straight away and wash your hands afterwards
- ✓ clean objects and surfaces you touch often (like door handles, kettles and phones) using your regular cleaning products
- ✓ clean a shared bathroom each time you use it, for example by wiping the surfaces you have touched

Don't

- ✗ do not share towels, including hand towels and tea towels

Moving home and evictions

Current advice is that home buyers and renters should, as far as possible, delay moving to a new home while emergency measures are in place to fight coronavirus. In some cases, this may be unavoidable and social distancing measures should be in place. Viewings of occupied properties by prospective tenants should be done online, for example. You can find specific Government advice on moving here <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/government-advice-on-home-moving-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>

The Government acted in late March to freeze Section 21 (no-fault eviction) notices. However, the new laws do not completely prevent a landlord serving notice on you, in effect the law changes the normal two-month notice period to three months, which may be extended.

A landlord in most cases needs a court order to force someone to leave their home. In addition, the Government and court system halted all ongoing housing possession action so in effect, evictions can no longer take place.

Rent payments

Tenants are still liable for their rent and should pay this as usual. If you struggle to pay, support is available. In the first instance you should speak to your landlord, tenants and landlords are encouraged to work together to put in place a rent payment scheme. This will help landlords and tenants to agree reasonable repayment plans where rent arrears may have arisen. Measures are in place to help those landlords with a buy to let mortgage if their income is affected by the pandemic.

If your income is disrupted, you need to claim all the benefits you are entitled to straight away.

The situation regarding benefit entitlement in relation to the coronavirus is changing day by day, the best way to find out the benefits you might be entitled to is to use an online calculator.

Reading Borough Council has a benefit calculator you can use at www.reading.gov.uk/uc/claiming click 'Universal Credit online calculator', this will check entitlement to all benefits.

If you are already claiming benefits you will need to notify them of your reduction of income so they can be reassessed.

Both Universal Credit and Housing Benefit increased from April.

Leaving a rented property early because of coronavirus

You can only end a fixed term tenancy early if your contract has a break clause or if you can negotiate an early end to the tenancy with your landlord. You may still be liable for rent if you leave without agreement.

Your landlord may be sympathetic to your request to leave if they understand your reasons. For example, if you need to move urgently because you or a family member are sick or need support.

Sources of information

The situation and the guidance are changing rapidly, do keep up to date online on the best advice:

The main government consolidated advice for tenants is at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-and-renting-guidance-for-landlords-tenants-and-local-authorities>

Shelter offers a range of advice for tenants around assistance on:

- Eviction
- Rent payment problems
- Benefits and other financial help
- Domestic abuse
- Homelessness
- Moving home
- Mortgage arrears and repossession
- Landlord access to your home

https://england.shelter.org.uk/housing_advice/coronavirus

Help and support

The council is coordinating with a range of groups to help the vulnerable and most in need. If you are able to volunteer to help this community effort, please fill in the [Team Reading: Coronavirus response volunteers form](#) - groups can register online with [Reading Neighbourhood Network](#) or call 0808 1894325 (freephone) from 9 am to 5 pm Monday to Friday, 9 am to 1 pm on Saturday and Sunday.

If you, or someone you know is in need of extra support, please fill in our [online coronavirus support form](#) or call 0808 1894325 (freephone) from 9 am to 5 pm Monday to Friday, 9 am to 1 pm on Saturday and Sunday.

If you are at risk of becoming homeless and would like some advice please contact 0118 9372165 to discuss, or email less urgent enquiries to housing.advice@reading.gov.uk

If you call this main Housing Advice number, you will only have the facility to leave a message, however the answerphone will be regularly checked throughout the day and you will receive a call back the same day if your message is left before 4pm.

Closure of council offices

Our offices are currently closed to visitors. However, our Private Sector Housing and Homeless Prevention teams remain contactable - bear with us as at times it may take a little longer for us to respond. You can find up to date details on how council services are being affected at <https://www.reading.gov.uk/coronavirus>.

You may find it more convenient to report disrepair issues or contact officers by e-mail. Please send your e-mail to hmo@reading.gov.uk if you do not have a specific officer's e-mail address, and your message will be forwarded on.

Private Sector Housing Team
Reading Borough Council

Email: hmo@reading.gov.uk
Phone: 0118 9372151