



From: Mrs Anne Jobson OBE
Chair
Exeter St James Forum
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To: Mr M Shore-Nye
Registrar and Secretary
Exeter University
Northcote House, The Queen's Drive
Exeter, EX4 4QJ

SENT ONLY AS AN ATTACHMENT TO AN EMAIL DATED 30TH JUNE 2020

Dear Mr Shore-Nye

Thank you for your letter of 24th June 2020.

The Exeter St James Forum are disappointed with the response from Exeter University.

Whilst you express the laudable sentiment that you have made it repeatedly clear throughout the pandemic that the safety of your students, staff and the communities you are part of remain your highest priority, I am afraid that your actions to date have simply failed to implement any strategy to achieve that result.

You point out that the academic year has ended. I understand that the campus remains closed. There should therefore be no students in Exeter other than those who for whatever reason were locked down in Exeter and who have chosen to remain.

In your Message to students dated 24th June you have still failed to inform them that the guidelines do not permit them to return to their term time private rented accommodation. You have continued to give the green light to students to return to Exeter and you have provided no facilities for them if they return. I am aware that Rory Cunningham will have been given details of entry into locked playground premises at Thornton Hill. I can add to that groups of students playing with a football in Queen's Crescent Garden meaning that local residents who had been appropriately picnicking in the Garden have felt unable to do so. You have no doubt heard about night after night disturbances from partying students, letting off fireworks illegally after 11pm and early morning noise from those returning from partying. In addition, local residents finding groups of students who fail to respect even 1m distancing when passing by on the pavement or in local shops.

I am intrigued by your reference to the government guidelines of 13th May permitting people to move home. Although you did not explicitly give any reason in your

Statement of 8th June to explain why students were permitted to return to Exeter, your use of a paragraph taken almost verbatim from Government Guidance to advise students this was permitted strongly suggests you were relying on this guidance as justification. However, as was pointed out to the University prior to the issue of your Statement, this guidance applies exclusively to students who had remained throughout lockdown at their student accommodation, and who are now permitted to move away to alternative accommodation. Why the University chose to amend the wording making it appear that students were permitted to return from their lockdown homes around the country to live in their student HMOs, remains a mystery, but was clearly a serious error of judgement. Do you therefore now agree that your Message for Students of 8th June was wrong?

Your new reason for giving students the green light to return is however again an incorrect interpretation of the Government Guidelines. The Government guidance makes it clear that this refers to situations where “once you have agreed to move home by exchanging contracts or signing a tenancy agreement, you have entered into a legal agreement to move.” The returning students have moved back to the accommodation they signed agreements for before the start of the 2019/20 academic year. Unless there is some clear and unequivocal evidence on a case by case basis that a student has signed a new tenancy agreement for the late May/July period and is stating clearly that this is their permanent home then these guidelines do not apply to them.

What the University is suggesting is that students have the right to “flip” their permanent homes. This is simply not correct and runs wholly contrary to the principles of lockdown. The student right to a one-off move only applied to a student still resident in student accommodation. The Moving Home Regulations of 26th March 2020 as updated on 21st May 2020 make very clear provisions that simply do not apply to students who are wanting to move from their lockdown homes back to Exeter to meet up with friends, socialise and party.

On June 17th 2020 Secretary of State, Matthew Hancock, in answer to a question from a Cardiff resident about students returning in September stated that the DfE were currently working hard to develop guidance to minimise risks not only to University Campuses, but to surrounding communities. He later responded to a question that whilst rules had relaxed to some extent overnight stays were still prohibited.

The Exeter St James Forum therefore pose a number of questions to which we would like clear, unequivocal and detailed responses

1. Do you now accept that you mis-stated the guidance in your Message for students who have returned or intend to return to their privately rented property of 8th June when you indicated that students who “wished to make a one-off move to an alternative residence may do so” ?
2. Do you accept that the above message should have made it clear that this only applied to students who were at that time resident in student accommodation?

3. Why are you now saying that the Moving Home Regulations apply when it is clear that there is no intention that they should apply to students returning to their pre-existing term-time accommodation?
4. Does the University accept that “flipping” one permanent home for another is not permitted in any of the Guidelines and contrary to all government guidelines as to the principles of lockdown?
5. If you say that students are able to return to their term-time accommodation have you advised students that they must select this as their permanent home?
6. If the answer to 5 is “yes” then how many students have notified you that they have made such an election?
7. If the answer to 5 is no then how does the University know that students have made such an election?
8. Have the University given a list of any students who have indicated that they wish their term-time address to be considered as their permanent address to ECC and Police which would assist both those bodies in dealing with the burgeoning number of complaints.
9. Have the University provided the returning students with the HMO Guidance issued by the Government at paragraph 3.5 of the Coronavirus Guidance to Landlords and Tenants regarding conduct within shared houses?
10. If the answer to 9 is “no” will they now do so?

I refer you to the University Students and COVID-19 FAQ,s published on 9th April 2020 on behalf of Universities Minister, Michelle Donelan, and which show evidence of being updated around 11th May. It is clear that the guidance only contemplated students wishing to return to collect their belongings. The Blog Advice has provisions about social distancing and making specific arrangements with Accommodation Providers to return by agreement to collect belongings.

The Minister made it clear on 27th March what was expected when she wrote, “While many students will already have travelled home, I know that those of you who have not, or cannot, will be concerned about what you should do now. The Government's advice is that students remaining at university in England should now stay where they are and not attempt to travel. If you are living in student halls, or private rented accommodation, you should remain there and stay indoors while current restrictions are in force. As the Prime Minister said, staying put and remaining indoors is a crucial step now to slow the rate of transmission of COVID-19, to protect the NHS from being overwhelmed, and save the lives of fellow citizens.” It seems clear from this that the Guidance meant in terms that “home” equalled wherever you were at the start of lockdown.

In order to check on current guidance a check was also made of a number of Universities. Warwick University were proactive in publishing the Minister's statement as set out above. The Unipol guidance is equally clear and was most recently updated on 25th June 2020. This again concentrates on collecting belongings and moving out of student accommodation where locked down in that accommodation.

In a letter to our Membership Secretary, Robyn Connett, Exeter Community Safety Partnership acknowledges that “the letter circulated by the University earlier this

month has caused concerns within the Community, and recognise that the guidance provided by our Officers should have ensured that the message around non-essential travel and movement between residences was clearer.” Will Exeter University acknowledge the same?

In the meantime the burden continues to fall on our over-stretched police service; local residents continue to spend sleepless nights and a number of students continue to flout the regulations.

I am sure you do not want a spike in cases in Exeter in July/August. Local residents, Exeter City Council, Devon County Council, the Police and the R D & E Hospital certainly don't. Many people who had been shielding and were looking forward to being back outside are now too frightened because of the current situation. It is of utmost urgency that the University now actively encourages students to return forthwith to their lockdown homes by issuing appropriate guidance.

I would again stress that throughout the period of lockdown there has been no complaint raised whatsoever about the students who were locked down in Exeter. Many of them got involved with local community groups and were offering help. They are to be applauded. They and the University are being let down by a thoughtless, and apparently large number of students.

I look forward to receiving your reply.

Kind regards

Anne M Jobson OBE
Chair
Exeter St James Forum

cc: Robyn Connett
Cllrs Keith Owen; Kevin Mitchell; Michael Mitchell
County Cllrs Su Aves; Percy Prowse

