

Written evidence submitted by University of the Arts London Students' Union (Arts SU) to The Renters' Rights Public Bill Committee (RRB92)

1. Executive Summary

1.1. Recommendations:

- Recommendation 1: Abolish the need for guarantors in student accommodation
- Recommendation 2: Close the loophole created by Ground 4A and rent increase restrictions, which could see students paying more rent
- Recommendation 3: Students should be made aware of intention to enact Ground 4A before signing a tenancy agreement
- Recommendation 4: Expedite student cases to any new Ombudsman
- Recommendation 5: Determine 'unreasonable' rent rises based on the limits of student income
- Recommendation 6: Better define "anti-social behaviour" so as not to unfairly discriminate against students

2. Background

2.1. Arts SU is submitting our written evidence and recommendations to the the Renters' Rights Bill on behalf of the students at University of the Arts London. We represent over 21,000 students based in London, studying on specialist courses with a focus on art and design.

2.2. To compile the evidence for this submission, we have primarily drawn from large-scale research projects we have conducted with our members. These research reports are:

- Arts SU Private Renters Report 2023/24
- Arts SU Cost of Living Report 2022/23
- Arts SU Housing and Community Report 2021/22

2.3. The full findings of these reports can be found at <https://www.arts-su.com/change/research>

2.4. Many of our students are struggling with the enormous cost of renting privately, from landlords and Purpose Built Student Accommodation (PBSA). They also often live in poor quality accommodation in bad conditions, and face long waiting times for issues with their accommodation to be resolved to their satisfaction (if at all).

2.5. From our research, we found 42% of our members living in privately rented accommodation while studying stated that “almost all” of their monthly income goes towards meeting their housing costs. 30% of students individually contribute between £900 to over £1400 per month in rent. A significant number (23%) of students depend on debt to pay their rent and bills month to month.

2.6. We also found 44% of our members report living in privately rented accommodation where mould is a problem, while 32% live with damp, and a further 22% live in accommodation that is infested (with mice or insects, for example).

2.7. Further to this, students are making difficult choices with their spending already, which is compounded by rising costs for housing. We found over a third of our students have cut back on healthcare, such as dentistry or prescription medication (37%), almost half (48%) have cut back on food, while over half (54%) have cut back on commuting to university.

2.8. We believe that changes proposed in the Renters’ Rights Bill will make positive changes for students, but we believe it does not go far enough, and in some cases discriminates against students in ways other renters will not face. As such, our recommendations are intended to provide concrete proposals to ensure the Renters’ Rights Bill meets its full potential to overhaul the rights of all renters for the better.

3. Abolish the need for guarantors in student accommodation

3.1. Arts SU research has found that around 1 in 4 of our students who require a UK-based rent guarantor are not able to secure one. This is even worse for international students, where over 1 in 3 international students (34%) are not able to secure an appropriate rent guarantor.

3.2. Students are required to pay an exorbitant amount of money upfront to secure their accommodation when they do not have access to a guarantor.

3.3. Testimonies from our students illustrate the scale of the issue:

“Because I did not have a guarantor, I was required to pay 6 months upfront, which was £5800 (not including deposit), and then another 6-month instalment two months later. I could not pay this so had to find somewhere new.”

Home student studying at London College of Communication renting in a private house or flat

“One property that I almost secured required me to pay the whole tenancy upfront when my guarantor failed the referencing check.”

International student studying at London College of Fashion renting in a private house or flat

3.4. The issues with guarantors disproportionately impacts international students, but also Home students from vulnerable backgrounds, such as care leavers and those estranged from their families. Those impacted are not able to access the accommodation they need or prefer due to fee status or socioeconomic status, which may drive them into unsafe or illegal accommodation. We believe this to be a discriminatory outcome, which could be resolved by scrapping the need for guarantors altogether.

4. Close the loophole created by Ground 4A and rent increase restrictions, which could see students paying more rent

4.1. Provisions under Ground 4A allowing for student evictions in the summer, when coupled with the new policy on only permitting landlords to raise rents once per year, could lead to landlords evicting students to then increase the rent before taking on new tenants. Applying restrictions on rent increases on properties that also become vacant could close this loophole.

5. Students should be made aware of intention to enact Ground 4A before signing a tenancy agreement

5.1. Ground 4A in the bill allows landlords to evict students during summer to be able to re-let the property to another student.

5.2. Some students at UAL begin their course in January, and therefore under this rule could face the prospect of being evicted mid-year under this rule. A landlord should only be allowed to enact this provision if they have expressed their intention to do so before the student signs the tenancy agreement.

6. Expedite student cases to any new Ombudsman

6.1. Arts SU research finds that although 88% of respondents stated that they had raised an issue or complaint with their landlord or accommodation provider, only 43% believed their issue or complaint was resolved by the landlord, property agent or provider to their satisfaction, and only 45% believed it had been resolved in a timely manner.

6.2. This demonstrates the urgency of resolving student cases via an Ombudsman scheme, as many students face insufficient support in seeing their accommodation resolved, and often over a protracted period.

6.3. Ongoing housing disputes can create significant stress and instability, negatively impacting students' academic performance and mental health. For instance, a student facing eviction might struggle to prepare for projects or complete coursework due to the distraction and insecurity of unresolved housing issues. Some disputes, such as those involving unsafe living conditions (e.g., lack of heating, pest infestations, or structural issues), could pose immediate risks to student tenants' health and safety. Prompt resolution is necessary to protect students from physical harm or illness, particularly during crucial times like exam seasons or extreme weather.

6.4. In addition, student tenancies are often far shorter in length than the average tenant. Student appeals to the Ombudsman should be expedited to ensure they are resolved before the expiration of the tenancy, and as a matter of urgency so as not to affect their studies.

7. Determine 'unreasonable' rent rises based on the limits of student income

7.1. Provisions within the Bill allow for appeals against an 'unreasonable' rent rise. We believe that what is deemed 'unreasonable' in cases pertaining to student accommodation submitted by a student should be determined within the context of limited student financial support and funding available, and the income restrictions placed on international students.

7.2. Student maintenance funding in the UK has faced a significant shortfall due to several years of freezes and below-inflation adjustments. For instance, maintenance loans for 2024/25 were increased by just 2.5%, which still leaves students approximately £1,900 worse off annually than if loans had kept pace with inflation since 2020/21.

7.3. This marks an 11% real-term cut over three years, making it one of the steepest reductions in support since the 1960s. Students from low-income households, who qualify for maximum loans, are disproportionately affected, as the income threshold for full support (£25,000) has remained unchanged since 2008, despite significant increases in earnings and living costs during that time. If this threshold had been updated, it would now be closer to £35,000, increasing eligibility for many students.

7.4 In addition, international students face significant hurdles in getting access to financial sources to support their maintenance while studying due to restrictions on employment imposed by the conditions of the student study visa. International students in the UK are subject to restrictions on employment as part of their visa conditions. Generally, they are allowed to work up to 20 hours per week during term time and full-time during holidays.

7.5. We therefore believe the context of financial restrictions many of our students are facing should be used to contextualise the definition of 'unreasonable' rent rises when pertaining to student accommodation.

8. Better define "anti-social behaviour" so as not to unfairly discriminate against students

8.1. Under the new bill, grounds for possession will include anti-social behaviour. This should be better defined under what constitutes anti-social behaviour, as students may have alternative social patterns that some unfair landlords could decide are anti-social.

8.2. Landlords might interpret "anti-social behavior" too broadly or subjectively, leading to arbitrary evictions. For example, a group of students hosting a one-time loud party might be labeled as "anti-social" or a landlord could misuse this power to remove tenants they dislike, even if the behavior is minor or one-off.

8.3. Under current arrangements, noise complaints are handled by the local council, and local councils work in partnership with universities to address issues of anti-social behaviour by students. Universities already have mechanisms to address anti-social behavior, such as disciplinary committees and codes of conduct, and granting landlords additional powers creates a duplication of systems, potentially leading to unfair double punishments for the same incident.

8.4. These powers may also act as a deterrent on students reporting issues they need support with. Students might fear reporting problems such as roommate conflicts, for fear that the entire household could face eviction, or reporting maintenance issues, in fear of retaliation from landlords.

8.5. We are also concerned about any discriminatory impacts this measure may have. Students with mental health issues might be unfairly targeted if their symptoms are misunderstood as anti-social behavior. For instance, a student with anxiety might be perceived as uncooperative or reclusive, leading to eviction based on misinterpretation.

8.6. The Bill gives landlords much extended and unfair powers to use their own discretion to determine eviction on these grounds, especially in the context of them having other powers to evict removed by provisions in the Bill. Evictions can have severe consequences for students, including homelessness or an inability to find alternative housing quickly, and students often have limited financial resources and social safety nets, making it harder to recover from an eviction compared to other tenants.