



Covid-19 Private Renters Follow-up Survey, May 2020

Full Report

Renters' Voice is a new project for people who rent privately in Northern Ireland to build a strong voice and influence landlords, politicians and government. We are supported by Housing Rights and funded by Nationwide Foundation.

In March 2020, we conducted a **survey of private renters in Northern Ireland** about their issues and concerns due to Covid-19 (or Coronavirus) and what measures they felt would be of help as a result.

Since then:

- Further measures and guidance have been introduced to help private renters.
- Lockdown measures that were put in place to protect people have started to be eased.

Our Follow-up Survey, conducted between 23rd and 27th May 2020, asked private renters about these issues. 24 people responded.

This **full report** details the responses to all the questions we asked. A shorter report was also shared on 27th May with the Department for Communities, focusing on responses regarding lockdown measures and potential easing of these.

Some important themes emerging from this survey are that a lot of private renters are **still very concerned** about **finances, paying rent, potential evictions** and **safety from the virus in their homes**. People also have **new concerns** about **what will happen following the initial crisis** and whether further financial and legislative support will be provided to meet private renters' continued needs.

Regarding lockdown measures, **7 in 10 people** thought that lockdown should be eased to allow for **non-emergency repairs** but **opinion was divided** about whether **viewings of rented properties and house moves** should be allowed

yet. **Nearly everyone** who responded thought that there would still need to be some **rules and exceptions** in place when these activities are allowed again and there were lots of **practical suggestions for what these should be**.

Guidance and information for private tenants

We asked private tenants if they were aware of the guidance document, 'COVID-19 Guidance for Landlords and Tenants in the Private Rented Sector', provided by the Department for Communities in April 2020.

2 in 5 said **yes**.

2 in 5 said **no**.

The remaining **1 in 5** said they were **not sure** if they had seen it or not.

We asked, if people had seen this guidance, had they found it useful?

No respondents told us that they had found the guidance **very useful**.

3 in 10 said that they had found it **useful to some extent**.

1 in 6 said they had **not found it useful at all**.

Just over half said they were **not sure** if they had found it useful.

Further feedback regarding the guidance and how information has been made available for private tenants during the crisis included:

Some respondents said again that they **had not heard about the guidance** or that their main source of information had been Housing Rights or informal sources such as friends.

Others commented that they had found **aspects of the guidance helpful** and that it had given them some **peace of mind**.

People also said they felt that:

- The guidance was **too long** and **not in plain English**.
- There is **remaining uncertainty** over some issues, for example when it will be possible to move on from rented properties.
- **Some landlords** have been **unable or unwilling to give advice and guidance or offer flexibility**.
- There is **no enforcement** available for a lot of the guidance and **no penalty for non-compliance**, meaning that landlords could choose whether to follow it or not.
- The guidance does not recognise the **unequal power dynamic** between private landlords and tenants with the landlord 'holding all the cards' in any negotiation.
- The guidance **does not go far enough** and that there should be more support for private tenants, including with respect to paying rent.
- The guidance **needs to be updated again** to provide information and advice around steps for coming out of the crisis.

Emergency legislation and support for private tenants

We asked if private tenants were aware of the emergency legislation requiring private landlords to give tenants 12 weeks' Notice to Quit (the Private Tenancies (Coronavirus Modifications) Act (Northern Ireland) 2020)?

Just over half said **yes**.

Just under half said **no or that they were not sure** if they had seen it.

We asked if this change to the law was something that people think could help with their situations during the crisis?

Just under half said **yes**.

1 in 3 said **no**.

The remaining **1 in 6** said they were **not sure** if it might help or not.

We asked private tenants if they'd had any experience of 'notice to quit' or eviction processes during the crisis or if there was anything else that they would like to say about the help that has been provided to private tenants.

Some respondents told us that they had been **threatened with illegal eviction** or **served notice to quit** during the crisis or were **concerned about the possibility of this**, for example:

“My landlord has threatened to perform an illegal eviction.”

“I have been threatened with 30 days’ notice during the crisis but nothing came of it other than a toxic living condition. I have found somewhere else to live.”

“[I’ve not been given notice to quit yet] but I am 6 months behind with my rent.”

“I’m worried if I ask for a rent reduction I might get notice to quit.”

People said they were concerned that **12 weeks is not enough time** in current circumstances to find alternative accommodation and that those whose notice expires will face further difficulties **if the housing executive does not have space to help** at present.

A big theme in people’s responses was **concern about what will happen after this initial crisis period**, for example:

“It’s good that the private rented sector is better protected by this legislation - but how long will it continue? Will it be renewed and what is the post-Covid-19 situation likely to be?”

“They can’t evict you during lockdown but what happens after? You get evicted and have all the arrears still to pay.”

“Private tenants are vulnerable to the pressures faced by landlords. I fear landlords will want to progress house sales sooner rather than later given the likely recession and that over the winter period at a time when there may be a possible second wave... I have never felt so insecure and worried

about the health and well-being of my family, and I am in the fortunate position of having a secure job and can still pay my rent.”

Another theme was that support for private tenants with **finances** and **paying rent** during the crisis **had not gone far enough** and that many private tenants continue to have **significant financial issues and concerns** as a result of the crisis.

Lockdown Measures

We asked private tenants about how lockdown measures have affected them and the people they live with.

They told us about impact on **work** and **finances**, **increased household bills** due to time at home and **being unable to pay rent**.

They expressed **uncertainty** over **expiring tenancy arrangements** and about **long-term options**.

They told us about **safety issues in communal areas** and **lack of control over social distancing** when **living in a shared property**.

They shared concerns about **safety** and **cleanliness** in **shared spaces in flats** such as hallways and lifts and it being unclear whose responsibility it is to keep these areas safe in the context of Covid-19.

They told us about **outstanding repairs**.

They told us about **social isolation** and **impact on mental health** for them and their families.

Whilst some people said that they wouldn't expect **easing of lockdown measures** to affect them much, others said that it was an **area of real concern**, for example:

“Both members of my household are shielding. My landlord had wanted to commence viewings to sell the property in March and I had to fight for our right to remain safe. The protection of those most vulnerable people must continue as lockdown eases. We have not left the house since mid-March and I would be so cross if we were now put at risk or exposed to the risk of homelessness because we were overlooked in any restart plans.”

We asked whether private renters think it is time yet to ease lockdown restrictions on the housing market (including allowing viewings and house moves)?

Just over half said that there should be **no change yet**.

Just under half said that lockdown should be eased to allow for viewings and house moves, with **nearly all** these respondents saying that there would still need to be some **rules and exceptions** in place.

We asked whether private renters think it is time yet to ease lockdown restrictions on repairs to rented homes?

3 in 10 said that there should be **no change yet**.

7 in 10 said that lockdown should be eased to allow for **non-emergency repairs**, with **nearly all** these respondents saying that there would still need to be some **rules and exceptions** in place.

We asked, when easing of lockdown goes ahead with respect to opening the housing market and allowing more repairs, what rules and exceptions do private renters think there need to be (if any)?

People said:

- Exceptions with respect to **medically vulnerable people** until there is a vaccine.
- Exceptions where someone in a household is **unwell**.
- **Need for consent from tenants, agents and landlords not 'letting themselves in'** and **action against landlords who force access** unless in an emergency.
- Need for **professional tradespeople** who follow **health and safety guidance** and **social distancing**.

- Requirements for **use of masks and gloves, limiting the number of people allowed** (e.g. for carrying out repairs) and **allowing access only to the area where repair is needed**.
- Requiring all parties to **inform each other if unwell**.
- Not allowing viewings of properties where **someone is already living there**.
- **Online viewing of properties first**, and then only those who are serious about renting or buying should be allowed in.
- **Risks must be owned** by the Departments.

Other concerns mentioned by private renters about the impact of easing lockdown included:

- Worries about **lack of enforcement** of any new guidance put in place.
- The need for **continued understanding**, that people's problems e.g. financial hardship, lack of childcare, difficulties securing work, will not end just because lockdown has been lifted.

Thank you for reading about the results of this survey. For further information about the Renters' Voice project, please contact us at rentersvoice@housingrights.org.uk.

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