



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

2 October 2020

Dear Ellen, Niamh, Rachel, Fizzy, Amanda and all Students,

Thank you for writing and highlighting student concerns about current aspects of University accommodation that they are experiencing during the current pandemic. We intend to address these issues with the following actions and activities:

1. Improve food provision:

At this time, we are providing and delivering over 1000 food isolation packs per day with a very small error rate. In fact our latest statistic from yesterday is 1200 (so, 3600 meals) with five complaints received and, of course, those issues have been rectified. Every student in University accommodation who needs to self-isolate receives three meals a day delivered to their accommodation. Given the logistical challenge of serving both self-catering and catered halls, we must deliver all three meals in one drop rather than two meals as per the current plan through the John McIntyre Centre. To speed up deliveries, we are delivering to foyers of buildings with dedicated site offices, for internal distribution to rooms/flats and other direct deliveries to more remote locations.

All meals provided are available as vegan and gluten free, with additional allergen requirements also met. We offer a different option over a seven day cycle. From feedback, we have recognised the need to provide an additional hot meal. Beginning Friday 2 October, we will offer a range of microwave ready meals. We are continuously reviewing our offering to ensure we can deliver the best possible option for our students.

We do acknowledge that there have been issues as this significant operation has been mobilised and we are sorry for that. As an acknowledgement of the difficulties some of you have experienced, we will provide a £50 voucher to all students in our University Accommodation. You will be able to choose one of three options for the kind of voucher you wish to receive. The details of how to make your choice will be communicated over the next few days.

2. Improve Wi-Fi connection in halls of residence

We want to ensure that it is as easy as possible for you to remain connected – in particular, if you are self-isolating. We are taking immediate action to improve Wi-Fi and Network connectivity for students in University accommodation:

- Typically the wired connection in your bedroom will provide better performance than the Wi-Fi connection. We have ordered 3,000 cables and these will be provided free to students at all Halls over the next three days
- Detailed investigations into network issues are continuing with our Halls network provider PCCW, and it is important that if you are experiencing issues with the network or Wi-Fi in your student accommodation that you raise a support call. You can do this at: care@optifyourworld.com or 0333 308 000

- We recommend that you register your device(s) and use the Optify portal to track progress of your service issues. You can do both at: <https://myaccount.keysurf.net/>
- We are distributing updated communication to ensure students understand their support options, thus speeding up the support process and resolving individual student issues
- We are increasing our IT support presence at the Halls to swiftly investigate problems and assist students. We will also be able to provide alternative internet access to those students unable to connect their device to the Halls network
- You can find additional guidance on student IT and Wi-Fi here: <https://www.ed.ac.uk/information-services/help-consultancy/students-it-requirements-guidance-and-support>

3. Increase mental health support

The University is offering a wide range of services and are dedicated to supporting students with their mental health and wellbeing. This includes counselling, mental health mentoring, support from our Residence Life team and Wardens in all of our accommodation, as well as a growing range of online support services, courses and apps. Our Residence Life team, of almost 200 Residence Assistants and Wardens, already operate a pro-active checking in service with students at risk within halls of residence. We are currently using remote delivery through online platforms, as well as ‘in person’ interventions with hygiene measures and physical distancing in place.

In response to the current situation, we have also expanded access to our Listening Service, which offers all students (and staff) a safe place to talk about issues and concerns. This service is now available 24/7. It can be used to support students in times of crisis and will link them to specialist sources of help if needed. Details on how to access this service can be found at: <https://www.ed.ac.uk/chaplaincy/the-listening-service>

Through our [Student Disability Service](#), we are pro-actively reaching out to students with known mental health conditions to check in with them, ensure they are aware of support available and are encouraged to reach out for help.

To make sure as many people as possible across campus are aware of the supports in place, wellbeing services staff have developed a set of 16 ‘good practice’ toolkits for academic and professional services staff across the University, focused on delivering wellbeing support for students, sign-posting and escalating to specialist mental health and wellbeing services where needed.

We have also developed an accessible ‘service guide’ created to bring together information on student support service availability and accessibility in one place for all University staff.

4. Develop a plan to address isolation:

To prevent and reduce isolation, the Residence Life team is delivering a programme of events for students in accommodation, using remote delivery through online platforms, as well as ‘in person’ interventions with hygiene measures and physical distancing in place.

Wellbeing information and resources are being drawn together to ensure students have access to a range of events, sports and exercise sessions and wellbeing groups (e.g. mindfulness) so they feel connected, engaged and supported.

- Online [Mindfulness](#) and other sessions are available on Tuesdays and Fridays through the Chaplaincy

- The [Keep Active Programme](#) has a range of resources to help you remain active from home and to help you maintain positive health and wellbeing
- The [Sports Union](#) runs a wide range of sports clubs and activities to help students meet other people and to participate in sports of all levels
- Residence Life hosts a great range of events for students in University accommodation
- We also know that the [Students Association](#) is hosting a wide range of events to engage with students and enable them to link up with up with other people

For students not in UoE managed accommodation, our new University Covid19 support team is providing a pro-active ‘check in’ function to all students who are self-isolating, with escalation to University mental health and wellbeing services for situations where students are isolated, or where there is risk present. A similar service is delivered within University accommodation by our Accommodation, Catering and Events teams.

5. Provide all staff with suitable PPE:

We are currently revisiting all our risk assessments and PPE is addressed as part of that review. Where identified as required we will supply PPE. All properties have also now got a supply of face coverings available for staff and students.

6. Clearly communicate students’ rights regarding ending their tenancies early:

We hope that the experience is improving despite the restrictions however, if students do wish to leave their University accommodation early we will be flexible and will not hold students to the 28 day notice period. Although, we do all need to be mindful of the current Scottish Government guidance which does advise that if you are able to you should remain in your student accommodation and not visit family at home.

If you still wish to apply for a lease break students need to email Accom.allocations@ed.ac.uk (we are in the process of developing a way of applying for lease breaks via the student hub on MyEd, which will hopefully be live within the next few days).

Students will receive an immediate response and be told that they will receive an answer on their request to break their lease within two working days. Once their lease break has been approved the student will be asked to let us know when they have departed, cleared their room and handed in their key. Once we have received confirmation that they have removed their belongings and returned their key we will end their lease and they will receive any refund due.

7. Offer a 4-week rent rebate to all students with a University accommodation contract:

We will not be offering any refunds at this time.

8. Allow students who have been unable to travel to Edinburgh to hold their room in University accommodation:

We will provide students with a room in University accommodation regardless of their intended arrival date. We are making every effort to provide students with the exact room they were initially allocated. However, given the circumstances, we cannot guarantee this in all circumstances. We can only guarantee the specific allocated room should the student wish to start the lease agreement immediately.

We hope that these steps will improve the student experience throughout this challenging period. We continue to listen to feedback and, as student welfare is our number one priority, are fully committed to improving the student experience.

With best regards,

Peter

Peter Mathieson and all of the Senior Leadership Team

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