

UK: One million threatened with homelessness as government ends eviction ban

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Over a million people face being evicted from their rented homes in the next weeks and months, after the Conservative government ended its temporary ban on bailiff-led evictions.

Throughout the pandemic, bailiffs were asked not to carry out evictions, with notice periods being extended to six months from the pre-pandemic period of two months. From June 1, the notice period dropped to four months.

The ban on evictions was introduced at the start of the pandemic by Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government as part of series of concession to placate mounting anger in the working class. It offered protection for tenants who fell into arrears, as many workers lost their jobs or were furloughed and suffered major cuts in income. The government has sought to end the ban several times over the last year but in the face of public opposition was repeatedly forced to extend it.

Johnson's statement in February that this would be the last lockdown and that the economy had to be "irreversibly" reopened in June finally cleared the decks for the ending of the evictions ban. Housing Minister Robert Jenrick announced on March 10 that the restriction would end May 31.

The government is ensuring that almost nothing will prevent landlords from evicting tenants, stating only, "Evictions will not be carried out if a member of the home has Covid-19 symptoms or is self-isolating."

According to research by the London School of Economics and Political Science, at least 100,000 claims over landlords attempting to kick out tenants could be subject to a court case this year.

Those in power and in the opposition parties have a vested interest in the evictions ban being lifted. Almost one in five of Parliament's 650 MPs are landlords. Last

month, the Inside Housing website noted that Labour's shadow housing secretary, Lucy Powell, "According to parliament's register of financial interests... is a private landlord and has rented a room in her London flat since 2015, and has a rental income of more than £10,000 a year." It added, "She is also a shareholder and unpaid director of New Road Management, which owns the freehold of six flats in London, in one of which she lives."

According to research published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) on Monday, based on a survey it commissioned of over 10,000 households, 400,000 people (5 percent of all renters) have already either been served an eviction notice or told they could be served one. A further 1 million households (11 percent of all renters), are concerned about possible eviction in the next three months. Half of these consist of families with children. Fully 1.7 million renting households are worried about paying their rent over the same period (20 percent of all renters).

Landlords in England are now able to evict tenants with just four weeks' notice if they have more than four months in rent arrears. There are 450,000 households currently in rent arrears and 18 percent of these (around 81,000 households) have been in arrears for more than four months.

Throughout the pandemic renters have received very little targeted support, despite them being more likely to have faced a major drop in income. In April this year, Local Housing Allowance (housing payments for private rented tenancies) was frozen again and kept at September 2019 levels. This is in effect a cut, as rental costs have continued to rise across the country.

Jon Sparkes, chief executive of Crisis, a charity that works to end homelessness, said, "There is no doubt that protections put in place to help renters has kept

people in their homes as they were hit with wage cuts, job losses and illness brought on by the pandemic. But we know that hundreds of thousands of renters will now be anxiously counting down the days until they are forced from their homes unless further action is taken.”

The eviction ban is being lifted under conditions in which millions will face the loss of all their income through unemployment and cuts in welfare payments. At the end of September, the government will withdraw a £20 per week uplift in Universal Credit put in place at the start of the pandemic. Millions of workers who have relied on the state paying 80 percent of their wages under the furlough scheme will be placed in dire straits as the scheme is ended.

The JRF noted, “Unemployment is not forecast to peak until after this period [June to end of August], and the furlough scheme and the £20 per week uplift in Universal Credit are not due to end until the autumn. It is deeply worrying that so many renters are concerned about eviction before these protections are withdrawn.”

Those already living on a low income/in poverty were most at risk of eviction, the JRF survey found. “Households with three or more children are more than twice as likely to be worried about being evicted (21%) compared to households without children (9%).” Moreover, “Households with annual incomes below £25,000 are three times more likely to be worried about paying rent (24%) compared to households with incomes of £50,000 or more, and they are also significantly more likely to be behind with household bills and rent payments compared to households on higher incomes.”

During the pandemic, many renters have become poorer in an effort to keep their homes, with nearly 1.5 million renting households cutting spending to offset lost income: “33% of renters in arrears turned to borrowing, with a quarter (24%) borrowing from friends or family, one in ten (11%) borrowing from a bank or building society and, worryingly, 7% borrowing from a payday lender.”

According to Citizens Advice, in January this year 28 percent of those on a zero-hour contract were behind with their rent, as were 27 percent of agency workers, 16 percent of students, 13 percent of furloughed workers 12 percent of disabled people.

Tenants have spoken out on social media. One said on Twitter, “This is wrong. A ban on evictions should

stay whilst this pandemic continues... Government should use the time to bring in laws protecting tenants. They will not as they back greedy landlords.” A mother commented on Facebook on the threat of eviction, “That’s what will happen to my daughter and I if I don’t get another job soon. 8 months unemployed is taking its toll.”

The pandemic has exacerbated the never-ending programme of austerity which has plunged millions into poverty over the last decade. The Socialist Equality Party opposes all evictions of tenants in rent arrears and demands the restoration of the evictions ban and the cancellation of arrears accrued during the pandemic through no fault of tenants. Only on the basis of a workers’ government and a socialist programme can the social right of access to affordable, quality housing for all be secured.



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