



**THE · VERSE**

UNIVERSITY OF BRIGHTON'S  
OFFICIAL NEWSPAPER

## **The Verse**

Brighton University's Official Student Paper

### **LOCAL NEWS: Brighton Lets to deposit threats – an investigation into Grosvenor Properties**

Lilly Croucher 21/01/2021

“It appears that Grosvenor Properties have been exploiting and targeting the students of Brighton and Hove for the past few years, facing little to no consequences. Just some of the most common issues are unfounded charges, taking deposits, ignoring emails, and failing to carry out repairs. As a group we are hoping that together, our collective experiences will

**have more of an impact and that we can get some kind of result or justice.”**  
– Ruby Slade

The beautifully coloured houses that line the streets of Brighton is a common sight for most first-year students choosing their future university house. But imagine if you walked into one of these properties to find a damp gloomy house with broken windows, burst water pipes and walls festering with mould. You'd be forgiven in thinking that this was an abandoned squalid property unfit to house anyone wanting to live there for longer than a few nights.

However, living in these dreadful conditions for months on end is the grim reality for quite a few Brighton students, whilst also being charged extortionate rents of upwards of £500-600 per month.



Grosvenor Properties, also known as Citylets Sussex, is a student letting agency working in Brighton for 'over 25 years'. According to their website, Grosvenor Properties has 'over 50 top of the range properties in Brighton city centre'. They claim that they have a team 'dedicated to make sure that all of our houses are kept in the best condition and that your tenancy is a memorable one'.

From the statements made by a number of ex-student-tenants renting with Grosvenor Properties, most of them would strongly disagree with this statement, except for the 'memorable' tenancy, which most would agree with, but not in the way Grosvenors would have you believe. The testimonials on their website show them to be a respectable and well managed letting agency but after further investigation, this is far from the truth.

A report gathered by an ex-tenant, including statements from other ex-student-tenants, revealed that

- **66%** of ex-tenants experienced concerning problems with their houses, including cracks in the ceiling, burst water pipes, mouldy washing machines, rotten windows and even infestations of woodlice, slugs and rats.
- **100%** of these ex-tenants reported mould growing throughout their house, which when reported to Grosvenor Properties, said the agency did nothing, with one statement claiming they simply told them to 'wipe it off' and 'open a window'. The same ex-tenant went on to say as a result of the mould problem, they had to pay multiple visits to the doctor.

According to the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985, section 10, under 'fitness of human habitation', *'In determining [...] whether a house is unfit for human habitation, regard shall be had to its condition in respect of the following matters—*

Repair, stability, freedom from damp, internal arrangement, natural lighting, ventilation, water supply, drainage and sanitary conveniences, facilities for preparation and cooking of food and for the disposal of wastewater.



A house will be regarded as unfit for human habitation if it is detected that one or more of these matters is not suitable for occupation in that condition. From the testimonies of ex-tenants, it is clear that these houses are not fit for human habitation, with stability, damp and ventilation being the main issues.

Grosvenor Properties says that they do not take responsibility for mould growing in the house and that it is the tenant's responsibility. Their contracts state: 'Tenants must keep the rooms ventilated and heated during the cold weather so as to not create condensation, which can result in mould. [...] Tenant's failure to comply with this clause, it will be the Tenant's responsibility to pay the costs of the damage caused'.

But when ventilation and damp is being reported in these houses and nothing is being done, how can an agency expect mould not to occur?

The final blow, which most students reported, was being charged for this mould at the end of their tenancy, when the mould was caused by the agencies neglect or pre-existing to their tenancy.

When reporting these issues, tenants are referred back to their designated house manager.

**45%** of tenants reported having issues with one of the house managers, Kim Champion.

Many of the complaints revolve around Mr Champion not answering emails or calls, lying to students and making false promises.

These false promises included fixing broken appliances, hiring maintenance workers and agreeing set prices for cleaners which was later changed on their final bill.



Many of the reports of Mr Champion include him being “aggressive” and “hostile” towards students and in one instance, to a student’s mother.

This questionable behaviour continues when looking at the inner workings of the company.

At least two of the reports suggest that the Landlord would walk into properties unannounced. When asked who he was in one instance, he claimed to be one of the contractors fixing the windows.

It was only later on did the tenants find out he was in fact the landlord. They felt the situation was “uncomfortable and unprofessional” for “an older man to be walking into a house of 20-year-old girls”.

The allusive Landlords are usually kept private from the tenants. They are kept as a third party whose contact can be liaised through Grosvenor Properties.

However, when searching for Cityletts on Companies House it reveals the names of all the directors: Steven Harmer-Strange, Linda Harmer-Strange and Danielle Harmer-Strange. When looking at charges and ownership of the houses, it reveals that the Harmer-Strange’s are actually the owners of these properties and are therefore the landlords, yet they do not disclose this to students.

For students, this creates a sense of bewilderment and confusion of who is in authority of the house and ultimately, who to trust.

This undisclosed identity of the directors is continued when records show that between 2007 – 2011, Steven Harmer-Strange was a council member for Brighton and Hove council.



Steven Harmer-Strange, Councillor for Brighton and Hove City Council from 2007 to 2011 and director of Grosvenor Properties

This generates questions about the conflict of interest the Harmer-Strange’s would have had, being the landlords and directors of a student letting’s agency.

Speaking to an ex-tenants’ father, he described Grosvenor Properties behaviour as “scurrilous” when discussing their conduct towards his son and his housemates and when receiving back the deposit.

He described that after paying cleaners for the house and filming a video for evidence, Grosvenor Properties still took thousands of pounds off their deposit. He claims Grosvenor Properties still owes the students £1200, which he is still pursuing a refund for.

He says, “once they have your deposit at the end of your tenancy, they stop responding to your requests, they ignore all calls and emails and provided no copy of the exit inventory.”

**54%** of ex tenants said that Grosvenor Properties had taken huge amounts of money from them, with most claiming between £1000 – 2000 was deducted off their original deposits.

All of these tenants also reported that Grosvenor’s purposely ignored emails and calls when they disputed about the deposits after it had been taken. One ex-tenant had to get a third party to force Grosvenor Properties to answer their emails.

Where most landlords and letting agents allowed a discounted rent during the pandemic, Grosvenor Properties refused to lower the rent prices, even though most students went home to their families and didn’t live in these properties for months, with some never returning to live in their properties at the end of the first lockdown.

One ex-tenant, an international student, said they were “forced to continue paying for a room [they] weren’t living in” and were not allowed to find a replacement tenant for their contract.

This as well as the not replying to emails, caused the ex-tenant stress and anxiety.

Their dishonest approach towards students, lack of responsibility, deposit handling, and general behavioural conduct was said by the ex-tenant’s father to be “ethically questionable” and their “modus operandi is to systematically exploit vulnerable young people”.