



STUDENTS'
UNION

..... Advice &

Moving On

2011
2012



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A guide for students moving into private sector accommodation

Introduction

Welcome to this brief guide on what to do when moving into the private rented sector. Read on to find out about the essentials of choosing somewhere to live, what to look out for, how to avoid trouble before it starts and what to do if you do run into problems.

This guide isn't meant to be completely comprehensive, so if you are experiencing problems or want more information on surviving in the private rented sector then check out our website.

Good luck!

**Advice & Representation Centre, 1st Floor Falmer House
University of Sussex Students' Union.**

November 2011

Thanks to the Housing Office for their financial contribution towards the cost of this booklet.

Please note: this booklet uses the term 'landlord' because it has a precise legal meaning. This should not be regarded as inadvertent sexism.

Section 1 – Before looking for a place

What are your options?

- Stay in campus accommodation – this is unlikely unless you can apply for a family flat or have medical needs that require you to be housed on campus- contact the University Housing Office for details (see the back page for contact details)
- Become a residential advisor – you get to stay on campus and have a reduced rent- see www.sussex.ac.uk/residentialservices/1-3-1.html for details of the job description, time required and responsibilities.
- Most students end up in a shared house or living with their landlord as a lodger – what are the pros and cons?

Housing Type	Pros	Cons
A shared house This is likely to be known as an Assured Shorthold Tenancy (AST)	Secure- you can't be evicted without legal notice and a court order Deposits have to be protected by a tenancy deposit scheme	Usually a joint tenancy – see section 3 Inflexible-usually have to sign up for a fixed period e.g. 6/9/12 months Can be difficult to end it early if your circumstances change
Lodgings Living with a landlord in their home	Flexible- usually either party can give notice and end the agreement easily May require less deposit and less rent upfront Can suit quieter students/ postgraduates etc as not in big shared house	Less security – may have to leave at a week's/ month's notice Less privacy – living with landlord May be more house rules No protection for deposits apart from through court action
Large houses	There's always someone to talk to!	More difficult to get agreement between large groups on communal issues

Who do you want to live with?

Problems between tenants in shared houses are one of the top reasons students come to us wanting to leave their house early. Living with people you no longer like, or with conflicting lifestyles, can be stressful, affecting your studies and your health.

Ask yourself a few questions:

- Do you like your own space? Would you prefer living on your own (more expensive), or as a lodger?
- Could you move in with your boyfriend/girlfriend? What if you broke up?
- Do you share similar lifestyles with your friends (study attitudes/going out etc)
- Are your friends reliable/good with money?
- Is a large group (5 or over) such a good idea? Why not spilt into smaller groups but try and live in the same area/ street?

NB- Council Tax- remember most full time students are exempt from paying it but if you are planning to live with someone who is not a full-time student then seek advice. The local authority will need to see proof you're a full-time student unless you live in University accommodation – visit www.sussex.ac.uk/sas/1-6-8.html for details.

Section 2 – Finding a place

How do we find accommodation ?

Good places to start are the University of Sussex Housing Office database of registered landlords – Yourstudentpad and the new Students' Union lettings agency (see below).

Yourstudentpad

This online database of landlords is run jointly with Brighton University. At the time of writing, the date that properties for the 2012/13 academic year will be advertised has not yet been decided, but will probably be early in Spring term 2012. As well as advertising available properties, it has a student messageboard if you need to find a housemate. Contact the Housing Office for the password to access the website at www.yourstudentpad.co.uk.

Why use Yourstudentpad?

To register with the University landlords have to show that they have met certain legal obligations and signed up to a Code Of Standards setting out landlord good practice . You can complain to the University if you find that your landlord is ignoring the code. For more details see the University Housing Office website at www.sussex.ac.uk/residentialservices

Sussex Student Lettings

To help you find a new home, the Students' Union now runs its very own lettings agency, Sussex Student Lettings.

Renting a property (especially for the first time) can be very intimidating, and they are there to help make it as straightforward as possible. Unlike private sector lettings agents, Sussex Student Lettings **do not charge any fees to students...**not for any initial administration, sign-up or other associated fees! Sussex Student Lettings has an office in the Common Room on the first floor of Falmer House, (the Students' Union building) where you can pop in to see what's available. If you're not on campus you can call them on 01273 678787, or visit the website www.sussexstudentlettings.com

Other letting agents

The University Housing Office also produce a list of letting agents, but the best way is to ask other students who their letting agent is and if they're any good.

There is no major regulation of letting agents so shop around and note:

- they can charge a fee for finding accommodation
- it's illegal for them to charge a fee if they don't find you anything
- they charge for references, setting up the tenancy agreement or check ins
- they often insist on UK guarantors, who usually also have to be homeowners
- they may ask for significant amounts of rent in advance if you can't provide a guarantor

Websites

www.fish4lettings.co.uk
www.findaproperty.com
www.rightmove.co.uk
www.theargus.co.uk
www.friday-ad.co.uk
www.gumtree.com

You may pay no or less fees by finding a house through private adverts but take care – they are probably not vetted and could be suspicious. Use common sense and follow the site's guidance and safety tips. If you think an advert is dodgy you can report it to the site.

Around campus

There is a notice board outside the Housing Office where people can advertise if they need people for their house. There are also various other boards around campus and people might advertise on the small ads section on the University website.

How much will it cost?

How much can you afford? Rents vary but average rent locally is approximately £80-95 for a room in a shared house. Agent fees vary so shop around for the best deal and negotiate!

Example

Agents fee	£150
Holding fee	£200 (to secure the property – this may be held as part of the damage deposit if you take the property)
Rent	£370 (usually paid 1 month in advance)
Deposit	£370
Total	£1090 or £890 (if holding fee is held as part of the damage deposit)

Deposits

There is no limit legally on the amount of deposit a landlord can request – it could be 1 months rent, 6 weeks rent or more. It covers the landlord if you don't pay your rent or damage the house.

However, if you are an assured shorthold tenant and you pay a deposit it **MUST** be registered with a national Tenancy Deposit Protection Scheme within 14 days of you paying the deposit. There are 3 schemes and you must be notified of which one holds your deposit.

For more information and contact details of the schemes see:
www.direct.gov.uk/en/TenancyDeposit/DG_066373

Why is this good?

In the past some landlords often withheld deposits for no good reason- now if there is a dispute about deductions from the deposit the scheme deals with the matter and makes an independent decision – it's not up to the landlord and you should get your deposit back quicker at the end of the tenancy.

If your landlord refuses to register your deposit- get advice – you could take them to court and possibly get up to 3 times the deposit as compensation.

Guarantors

You may be asked to provide a guarantor - this usually needs to be a UK based homeowner, often your parents or a relative. They are signing to say they will pay the rent or cover the costs of any damage (over the deposit amount) if you don't pay.

Make sure they are only signing to guarantee your personal rent liability (not the full property rent)!

If you cannot provide one it is likely the landlord will ask for more rent in advance – possibly the full 6 or 12 months of the agreement's length. This is not illegal but the amount may be negotiable.

Section 3 - Choosing your property and checking your contract

Once you have identified a potential property, you can save yourself a lot of hassle and worry if you take the time to properly consider a few key issues before you formally agree to the tenancy and move in:

First of all, don't panic!

Students sometimes feel pressure to rush into taking a property as quickly as possible. The first place you see probably won't be the most suitable for you, it is much better to see a range of places before making any firm decisions.

The reality is that there is usually a steady stream of reasonable properties available through the spring and summer months, they don't all disappear in the first few weeks! So, don't panic but don't leave it until the last minute either.

Think about the location of the property.

- How is it placed for local amenities and services such as shops, banks etc?
- How convenient are the transport links to and from campus, and into the centre of town?
- Can you imagine yourself happily living in the neighbourhood for the length of your tenancy?
- Would you feel safe walking home at night?
- If you have a car, will you need a parking permit?

If possible, speak to the current tenants

They are the people best placed to give you an honest opinion about stuff which you won't necessarily get from the landlord or letting agent:-

- Are there any 'hidden' defects or problems with the property or appliances?
- What are the neighbours like? Are they noisy party animals, or alternatively are they likely to complain about your noise?
- What are the landlord /letting agents really like? How efficiently do they respond to queries, repairing requests etc? Do they make unreasonable demands?

Take time to check the tenancy agreement before you sign it

If necessary, contact us if clarification is needed. Lots of disputes between landlords and tenants are caused by initial misunderstandings about the various contractual obligations in the agreement.

For instance:-

· How much is the rent and when should it be paid?

Can you afford it?

Does the contract require a large deposit and initial rent in advance to be paid?

Will you be required to pay a 'retainer' (reduced rent) during the summer vacation?

- **What is the length of any fixed-term period in the contract?**

Many tenancy contracts specify a minimum length of occupation, for example 6 months. If you sign such a contract and there is no early termination clause then you may find it difficult to obtain the landlord/agent's agreement if you subsequently wanted to move out early. Unless you can find a replacement tenant you may find that the landlord insists on holding you liable for ongoing rent for the whole of the remaining term.

You may like to ask the landlord/agent about how they would deal with such a scenario, but the moral of the story is don't enter into a fixed term contract if you have doubts that you will want to stay in the property for the whole of the relevant period!

- **Are you being offered a 'sole' or 'joint' contract?**

If you sign a sole contract then you can't be held liable for your housemate's contractual obligations. However, if all of you sign one joint contract then you will all be 'jointly and severally' liable for all the tenants' obligations under the contract. For example, if one of you causes damage to the property then any of you could be billed for the cost of this; and if one of you were to move out before the end of a fixed-term period then, again, any of you could be chased by the landlord/agent for a resulting shortfall in the rent.

- **So if you are being asked to sign a joint contract you have a special reason to think carefully about your fellow housemates – do they understand the above, and are they serious about wanting to stay for the length of any joint fixed-term?**

- **Does the contract specify to what extent the property is furnished?**

Clarify this; you don't want to suddenly discover that it is your responsibility to supply all your own furniture, and possibly a fridge etc

- **Who is responsible under the contract for paying utility charges?**

i.e. gas, electricity, water. These will usually be the tenants' responsibility. Also check if you are allowed to change supplier under the contract.

- **What other obligations will you have under the contract?**

For instance, are the tenants responsible for the upkeep of any garden?

Are you forbidden to smoke in the property?

Does the contract require you to obtain permission from the landlord/agent before redecorating or fixing things to the walls?

Think about the condition of the property when you visit

You should always try to visit a property before you sign up to a tenancy. During your visit it is worth taking the time to properly check the state of repair and general condition of the accommodation, internal fixtures and appliances before you sign up to a tenancy. Remember—try asking the existing tenants about any problems they have had!

Here is a list of the sort of things you could be checking regarding the condition of the property:

- Look at the exterior of the property. Is the guttering in place? Are any roof tiles missing or window frames obviously rotten?
- Are there any obvious areas of damp or mould on interior walls or ceilings?
- Is there adequate ventilation in the kitchen and bathroom?
- Do windows open and close properly, and can they be locked?
- Is the condition of the carpets, curtains and decorations satisfactory?
- How is the water heated (e.g. gas boiler, immersion heater etc)? Does the system appear to be in working order? If appropriate, ask to see the Gas Safety Certificate for the property – all landlords must get gas appliances, pipework etc checked by a Gas Safe Registered engineer every 12 months and show you the safety certificate when you move in – visit www.gassaferegister.co.uk for further details.
- Are any of the taps leaking?
- Does the toilet flush?
- How is the property heated (central heating, electric fires etc)? Are all relevant fixtures in working order? Is it double glazed?
- Are there enough electric power sockets in your room? Are there any obvious bare wires or damaged plugs?
- Do any electrical appliances provided by the landlord (washing machine, cooker etc) work?
- Is there a means of escape in the event of a fire? Are there smoke alarms?

If you find a property you like which needs some repairs, get a commitment in writing from the landlord that the repairs will be carried out within an agreed timescale before you sign up to the tenancy.

See Section 5 for a brief outline of a landlord's legal repairing obligations.

Don't forget - if you have any questions about your contract, are unsure about anything or want to make sure it covers all the relevant legal points get a copy of your contract and get it checked at the Advice & Representation Centre or the Housing Office. If your potential landlord won't allow you the time to get your contract checked independently, this could be a bad sign for the future!

Section 4 – Moving in

Moving in checklist:

- Make sure you do an inventory (a list of fixtures and fittings and the condition they are in) – this is your proof of the condition of the property when you move in and will help protect your deposit. Get it signed and dated by the landlord and you and keep a copy.
- Has your landlord registered your deposit with a deposit scheme and given you all the relevant information (see Section 2)
- Check all the meters for gas, electricity and water. Register and give these readings to the supplier to make sure you don't get charged for the previous tenants.
- Check the gas safety certificate – This is a legal requirement to ensure gas appliances have been safety checked every year (see Section 3).
- Check the energy performance certificate – This is a legal requirement and shows how energy efficient the building is. An A rating is the most efficient, G is the least - the average is D. The more energy efficient the more money you will save.
- If you have a TV, get a license! If you get caught without one (and you probably will!) you can end up with a hefty fine and a criminal record. Visit www.tvlicensing.co.uk for details. A colour TV license currently costs £145.50, and this amount is frozen.
- Take out property insurance or find out if you are covered by your parents' policy.
- Start keeping a record of any contact you have with your landlord or agent, this will save you a lot of time if you get into any disputes.
- Find out when your rubbish and recycling days are from your neighbours or your local authority website e.g. www.brighton-hove.gov.uk

Section 5 - During the tenancy

Sit down with your housemates and agree some basic rules for living together

For example:

- Cleaning rotas – who does what, and when?
- Should basic foodstuffs (milk, bread) be pooled, or bought individually?
- Do you need an agreement regarding noise after a certain hour, overnight visits by friends, etc?
- If bills and expenses are to be shared, who is to be responsible for collecting money from other housemates and making payments?

Short, regular planned house meetings can be a good way of ensuring that you continue to communicate with each other, and can lessen the likelihood of serious resentments or disputes building up.

Expect to not always have your own way. That is the reality of communal living – it is always a process of give-and-take.

Try to keep the property, particularly the landlord's furniture and the internal decorations, in a reasonable condition.

- It is accepted that 'fair wear and tear' will occur during a tenancy, but you will probably be billed for anything more than this. Disputes about deductions from deposits at the end of the tenancy can be stressful and time-consuming

Try to be a good neighbour- it pays to maintain good relations!

- Introduce yourselves to your neighbours when you move in. They may have unfounded or unnecessary fears about living next door to a load of students which you can allay; and getting off to a good start will make it more likely that channels of communication can be maintained.
- Confine noisy activities (loud music, vacuum cleaning etc) to reasonable hours. It is surprising how much noise can penetrate beyond the walls of your property. Not all your neighbours will keep 'student' hours; some may have early starts for work or have young children.
- Give prior warning regarding house parties, and don't hold them too often – get your friends to share the hosting of parties!
- Don't let rubbish accumulate outside your property or in communal areas shared with neighbours. You can find out refuse and recycling collection times from your local authority – e.g. visit www.brighton-hove.gov.uk or ask your neighbours. Be aware that some areas of Brighton & Hove have communal rubbish bins and you are expected to put your rubbish in these bins yourselves.

Save money during your tenancy!

- Save money by using heating and lighting effectively and efficiently by turning off lights and electrical appliances when they are not being used, only boil the water you actually need in your kettle, and try wrapping up in cold winter months as opposed to cranking up the thermostat.

- Also, think about using energy saving lightbulbs, putting your heating on a timer and using draught excluders – it all helps to reduce your energy costs.
- Keep your fridge and food cupboard fairly well stocked. This way when you get hungry late at night, you've no excuse to go to the nearest expensive takeaway.
- Think about buying food and essential items (e.g loo rolls!) in bulk which is usually more cost effective.
- Shop around for the best deals regarding broadband and gas and electric suppliers. Moneysavingexpert.com or gocompare.com are two websites which are worth checking for this.

If you have any dealings or negotiations with the landlord or agent during your occupation, ask for confirmation of important points in writing (letter, email), and keep a copy of these.

If you experience a repair problem, or discover a defect in your property during your occupation:

- Certain kinds of disrepair will always be the responsibility of the landlord to put right and pay for. For instance serious damp, problems with main structure of the property (roof, walls, window frames etc), faulty central heating, leaking plumbing.
- If you want to raise a repair problem with your landlord or agent—do this in writing! The landlord's legal repairing obligations will not be properly triggered until you have properly put them 'on notice' about the problem
- Ask the landlord/agent to give you a realistic timescale for when any repair work will be completed.
- **Contact the Advice & Representation Centre for more detailed advice and assistance with repair issues.**

If you (or one of your housemates if you have a joint tenancy) want to leave the property and give up your tenancy early – get advice!!

- Contact the Advice & Representation Centre for advice regarding how best to raise this issue with your landlord (see Section 3 for brief explanation of the difficulties sometimes experienced with fixed term contracts and joint tenancies)

Section 6 - Moving Out

Top tips to make sure your move out goes like a breeze!

Giving notice

If you haven't got a fixed term agreement that is expiring make sure you give written notice according to your tenancy agreement to avoid paying an unnecessary extra month's rent

Request your deposit back

The landlord may be able to legitimately deduct money from the deposit for rent owed, damage to the property etc. They should not charge you for 'fair wear and tear' e.g. carpets become worn with time but cigarette burns or marks /stains on the carpet could be charged for.

If there is no dispute over the amount of the deposit to be returned you should get it back within 10 days of your request to the scheme- please see individual schemes websites for more details. If there is a dispute you can request the scheme make a decision on a fair deduction.

Clean, clean, clean

A common reason for charges at the end of a tenancy is the landlord charging for a professional cleaning company. Make sure you clean to the standards expected under your contract or request guidance from the letting agents/landlord.

Do your gardening

If you have a garden and it's in a bad state you could be charged expensive professional fees for sorting it out - so get the help of family, friends or other green fingered people. It might even be cheaper to pay a gardener as the landlord may charge you more.

Remove rubbish!

Leaving rubbish inside or outside the property in the garden is also expensive- get rid of it! Check your local authority's website for details of your local tip and recycling facilities or advertise in advance on Freecycle – www.uk.freecycle.org

Meter readings

Take them on the day you move out and inform the utility companies to get your final bill.

Inventory checkout

Arrange an inventory check out/ inspection with your landlord/ letting agents. If not possible, make your own notes on the inventory and take dated photos of the condition of the property.

Redirect your important post

Give back your keys!

Useful Contacts

University of Sussex

Advice & Representation Centre

1st Floor, Falmer House, Brighton BN1 9QF

T: +44 (0)1273 877038

E: advice@ussu.sussex.ac.uk

W: www.sussexstudent.com/advice

Housing Office

Bramber House (Temporary move to Park Village Social Centre until Jan 2011)

University of Sussex, Brighton BN1 9QU

T: +44 (0)1273 678220

E: housing@sussex.ac.uk

W: www.sussex.ac.uk/residentialservices

Opening hours: 10.00-4.00 weekdays.

Closed for lunch 1.00-2.00pm every day except Wednesdays

Useful contacts in Brighton & Hove

Brighton & Hove Council Housing Advice and Tenancy Relations

Free advice on housing and problems between landlords and tenants for people living in private sector housing

T: 01273 294400

E: housing.advice@brighton-hove.gov.uk

Brighton & Hove Council Environmental Health and Technical Officers

T: 01273 293156

E: psh@brighton-hove.gov.uk

Brighton & Hove Council Local Taxation Services (Council Tax)

T: 01273 291291

E: council.tax@brighton-hove.gov.uk

Other useful contacts

National Grid's Gas Emergency Freephone

(ring immediately if you suspect a gas leak)

T: 0800 111 999

Shelter

National housing advice and campaigning organization

T: 0808 800 4444

http://england.shelter.org.uk/get_advice/

