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Keep your wits about you when renting

Many universities offer first-year students accommodation in university-managed halls of residence. Yet by your second year – and possibly also in your first year if there's not enough student accommodation available – the chances are you'll need to rent a property in the private sector. So it's vital to be clued up on your rights in private digs to make sure unscrupulous landlords don't end up taking advantage.

If going into a rented property you'll need to pay a deposit. This is usually about one month's rent. You'll also need to take into account that you'll probably be asked to pay rent over the summer to secure the property, even if you're not planning on staying in it.

Five things you need to know...

1. Tenancy deposit protection scheme

You need to make sure your deposit is protected. Landlords have 30 days from receiving your deposit to put it into a tenancy deposit protection scheme (where it stays in case of a dispute when you leave). If they fail to do this you could be entitled to up to four times back, but you'd have to go through the small claims court which is hassle.

2. Letting agent fees and signing the contract

To find a property to rent, you may need to use a letting agent – who rent out properties on landlords' behalf. These have notoriously charged extortionate fees for their services. As such, the Government has published proposals banning letting agents from charging fees to tenants. In the meantime however, always check for any extra fees or charges first, and factor them in.

Letting agents can't charge you just for registering or to show you their list of properties available for rent. Though otherwise they're free to charge any fees they like – for example, for credit checks, admin and even releasing your deposit. So always ask before you commit.

Once you get the contract, read it carefully before signing. Check it includes how much the deposit and rent is, when it's due, and what it covers (eg, council tax, utility bills, and other dos and don'ts, such as whether you're allowed to smoke or sublet).

Discuss points you disagree on, or don't understand, with the landlord or letting agent. If they agree to change it, don't just take their word. Ensure the contract's changed too so you've proof.

3. Tenants' rights

Which type of tenancy agreement you have, and when your contract started, will affect your rights, so check which you have. In a nutshell, 'assured shorthold tenancy agreements' are generally the most common type if renting with a private landlord.

As an assured tenant you have the right to stay in your accommodation unless your landlord can convince the court there are good reasons for eviction, for example rent arrears or damage to the property, or that another of the terms of the agreement has been broken.

3. Bills, bills, bills

When you find a property, how much rent you pay will usually be reflected in whether it includes bills or not – so this is something to consider. If it doesn't include bills, you're going to need to sort out the utilities, including gas and electricity, council tax, water and broadband.

You'll need to locate meters when you move in and take readings. Then whoever is in charge of that utility will need to submit meter readings throughout the year to make sure you don't get overcharged. No one wants to be in charge of all the bills. So if you live with a few other people, it's probably a good idea to divvy the bills between you and work out any extra each individual is owed once all bills have been paid.

But be careful how you work this. Having a joint bills account with a flatmate will mean that your credit records become financially linked, which means firms can access and look at that person's credit report as part of assessing whether to accept you for a financial product in future.

So, if your flatmate has a poor credit history or lots of debts, keep your finances rigidly separate (if you want to know more about how credit scoring works, see MSE's *Credit Scores* guide).

Alternatively, the nifty Acasa app will track your household bills and expenses, work out who owes what to whom and let you and your housemates request payments from each other. For more tips on renting see MSE's *50+ Tips for Renters*.

4. Paying your rent on time can boost your credit score

Private tenants can opt in to the free Rental Exchange scheme, which records your rental payments and sends the results to credit reference agency Experian. This can boost your credit rating, which will help in future if and when you apply for certain financial products such as credit cards, loans and mortgages. To keep track of your credit score, sign up to our free Credit Club.

For more information go to www.moneysavingexpert.com/students

What is MoneySavingExpert.com?

MoneySavingExpert.com is dedicated to cutting consumers' bills and fighting their corner. The free-to-use consumer finance help resource aims to show people how to save money on anything and everything, and campaigns for financial justice. It was set up in 2003 for just £100, and its free-to-use, ethical stance quickly made it the UK's biggest consumer website. It has more than 13 million people opted-in to receive the weekly MSE's Money Tips email, and more than 16 million unique monthly site users who visit more than 28 million times a month. In September 2012, it joined the MoneySupermarket.com Group PLC.