



A Guide To Home Hunting & Private Rented Accommodation

Looking for Private Accommodation

Before renting accommodation you should ensure that you are aware of what is involved so possible problems can be avoided. This guide gives an indication of matters that should be considered and it may help you to carry out a reasonable survey of any house or flat that you are thinking of renting. The degree to which you follow this guide will obviously depend on how badly you need the accommodation and/or how long you intend living there. However, there are laws concerning the letting of accommodation and they should be adhered to.

Any information concerning the law does not seek to be a detailed interpretation and therefore if you are in any doubt ALWAYS SEEK ADVICE.

Finding accommodation

You have two main choices as to when you look for property for the following year. The one you choose will largely depend on your financial situation.

Some students start looking after Easter and secure a place by paying a bond; the landlord in most cases will expect you to pay half rent (a 'retainer') over the summer or some kind of deposit.

If you don't want to do this, the alternative is to arrive in Sunderland just before your course starts. The drawback to this is finding somewhere to live temporarily while you're looking for somewhere more permanent. If you're a first year arriving in Sunderland for the first time you should be offered a place in Halls, but this could be only be temporary until you find something else, there will be plenty of help doing this.

How do I Find Private Rented Accommodation

- The University Accommodation Service

They will provide you with lists of landlords who have private rented accommodation in Sunderland. The houses are not checked for standards or conditions so you must be very careful. However, landlords on this list will be on the accredited landlord list and should therefore be aware of these standards. (Information about this is included here). Do not agree to rent the property if those standards are not met. Some properties can be in very bad condition and may be potential death traps.

- Newspapers
- Shop windows.
- Most notice boards in the University buildings carry notes about rented accommodation, the Library and Students' Union notice boards in Wearmouth, being the most popular.
- Word of mouth for continuing students is probably the best method of finding a house. This also applies to new first years.

- Internet
- Advertise yourself – place advert in shop/University Notice boards etc.
- Finally, you could try Estate Agents and/or Accommodation Agencies. However, it is unlikely that they will have anything in the student price range. Furthermore, if you use such agencies you will need to check whether there are any charges for the service(s) they provide. It is illegal for an agency to make any charge if all they do is register your details or supply you with a list of addresses. They are also not allowed to ask you to pay a deposit, which is returnable if no accommodation is found. However, an agency is allowed to charge for extra services provided (drafting a tenancy agreement, for example) but only if these are carried out with your agreement or at your request. Finally, no agency is allowed to discriminate on the grounds of sex or race against any person seeking accommodation.

The accommodation

Before looking at the accommodation it is worth considering the following:

Does the accommodation conform to the standards laid down by law?

Local councils will have a Department that is responsible for inspecting residential accommodation to make sure it is habitable and meets certain minimum standards. It is usually called either the Environmental Health Department or the Public Health Department. Sunderland Council runs the Sunderland Accredited Landlord Scheme – the council works in partnership with private landlords to provide good quality housing. The council should be able to give an indication as to whether they have been or are involved at a certain address – this is important in case the accommodation should not be let because it does not meet the minimum standards required or they do not subscribe to the Accreditation scheme.

INSPECTING PROPERTY

FURNITURE

- Will this be supplied?
- Is there enough for the occupants?
- Is there enough storage space, particularly in the kitchen?
- Does any of the furniture belong to the existing tenants or past tenants?
- Is the furniture in good condition?
- Is there a list (inventory) of all items in the accommodation? Check that it is complete, or make your own if one does not exist. Get the landlord or agent to agree to the inventory by signing it.

CONDITION OF THE PROPERTY

- Is the flat/house in a reasonable state of repair?

- Look for damp and mould; check in kitchen cupboards and behind furniture placed in room corners and against walls.
- Look for signs of loose and/or missing roof tiles.
- Look for signs of rotting window frames and make sure that all of the windows open easily when unfastened.
- How old are plug sockets and light switches/fittings? Has the property ever been checked or rewired?
- Check that taps, toilets and showers work. Check for pests, slugs trails, mouse droppings, woodlice etc.
- If there are gas fires, how long ago were they checked for safety?
- Does the heating work? Faulty gas appliances are dangerous and the landlord must get them checked on an annual basis.

DECORATING

- Does any decorating need to be done? If so, who is going to do it? With most types of tenancy, decorating is the tenant's responsibility, but the decoration should be in a reasonable state when you move in. If the decoration is in a poor state when you view the property you may be able to do a deal with the landlord if you are happy to do the decorating yourself – for example, you could negotiate a lower rent. Whatever is agreed, you must get it in writing.

SAFETY

- Landlords must have CORGI gas safety certificates for all gas appliances - ask to see them. They must show the certificates to you on request.
- Does the property have fire alarms – it should do, but this is not a requirement in law. Ask the landlord to fit them if there are none.
- In the event of fire, could you get out? That is, are there clearly marked fire exits, and are they free from obstructions?
- If it is a flat above ground floor level, is there a fire escape? This can be internal, the stairs being enclosed in the fire retardant materials.
- Does the property have self-closing fire doors?
- Are the doors and windows well fastened with good locks/bolts? (this may affect your house contents insurance).

Any problems that you find are best brought to the attention of the landlord immediately so that they can be sorted out before you move in. Make a list and keep a copy that clearly highlights the areas of concern. Try to get the landlord to give a date when the repair will be done – try to get this in writing. If the problem areas are not dealt with before you move in and/or it is not clean and tidy, tell the landlord in writing and keep a copy.

Other Matters

As well as looking at the property and its contents, there are several things you should think about and check them with the landlord.

RENT

- How much is it?
- How and when is it to be paid?
- What does it include? If it includes charges for such things as bills and/or water rates, ask for a detailed written breakdown.
- How much rent in advance will you have to pay?

GAS AND ELECTRIC

- Is there some form of heating for every room, and does it work?
- You must read the utility meters and inform suppliers of the date you start your tenancy along with the meter readings and the names of whom the bills should be sent to.
- Will the gas and electricity accounts be in your name or the landlord's? If it is to be in your name. Bear in mind, if it is in your name, and you have not had a gas/electricity account before, you may have to pay a deposit to the gas/electric boards or provide the name of someone with a gas/electricity account who would be willing to guarantee payment in the event of your being unable to pay. In the case of electricity you could ask for a key budget meter to be installed, for further details contact the supplier. This is usually a bit more expensive though. Payment cards for gas and electricity can also be used for bills, again contact your suppliers.
- If there is a group of you, you should all put all your names on the gas and electricity account – you will all then have a joint liability for the bills that come in.
- If the accounts are to be in the landlord's name, how much will you have to pay towards this?
- If the landlord has his/her own meter in the accommodation check that it does not collect more than the maximum amount allowed by the board concerned. You can do this through the advice centre. For further details refer to the leaflets produced by both the gas and the electricity boards.
- Make sure that the electricity/gas supplies do not supply other separate accommodation within the building, i.e. if a house has been turned into separate flats etc:

OTHER EXPENSES

- **COUNCIL TAX**
As a student you will not have to pay this providing you live in a household where everyone else is a full time student.
- **WATER RATES**
These are normally paid by the tenant. However, sometimes landlords do include these in with the rent – find out if this is the case and if so ask for a breakdown. If the landlord pays the water rates, this should be in your tenancy agreement. Any amount the landlord asks, for water rates can be checked with the water company.
- **SERVICES**

Does the landlord provide any services? For example:

- Cleaning, weekly changes of bed linen, etc.
- Window cleaning
- Gardening

Are there charges for these?

TENANCY AGREEMENTS

- What type of tenancy will it be – if it is for a “fixed-term” will you be able to end it if you want to leave at any time – if you are unsure SEEK ADVICE.
- What security will you have? Generally, you will have less security if the landlord lives in the same building as your accommodation is situated.
- Will you be provided with a written tenancy agreement or not? Do not sign anything without first reading it and understanding it – if you are unsure of anything SEEK ADVICE. Make sure you are given a copy of any agreement you sign and keep it safe. If there is a group of you make sure that all of your names are on the tenancy agreement.
- If it is a verbal agreement, make a note of what is said, confirm it in writing to the landlord and keep a copy.

RENT BOOK

In the majority of cases:

- If the rent is paid weekly and it does not include substantial board (i.e. food and other services) you should be given a valid Rent Book – your landlord could be committing a criminal offence if they do not provide you with one. If you are unsure about your right to have a Rent Book or you are unsure about the validity of the one you are given, SEEK ADVICE.
- If you are not entitled to a Rent Book you should ensure that you have a way of proving that you have paid the rent. For example, you could ask your landlord to provide receipts or you could pay by cheque. If your landlord will not provide some form of proof that the rent is paid, SEEK ADVICE. Never pay cash for anything without a receipt.

LANDLORD

- Do you know the landlord’s name and address? Tenants have a legal right to know this information. If the landlord will not give you these details SEEK ADVICE.
- Do you have a way of contacting the landlord in an emergency – for example, if there are burst pipes or a leaking roof. If not, check with the landlord as to what they would want you to do in such a situation.

RETAINERS AND DEPOSITS

As well as rent there may be one-off expenses when you move in:

- Retainers are not returnable. If you are required to make such a payment, this is normally to secure the property for when you start the tenancy agreement and move in.
 - Deposits are returnable. These are normally paid to cover any damage, unpaid bills etc, left by a tenant. The deposit should be paid in full to you when you leave, unless the landlord or agent feels there is a good reason to keep all or part of it. If you are asked to pay a deposit find out what it is for and ask for a receipt.
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Useful Links

Shelter: [Finding a Place to Live](#)

[Private Tenancies](#)

Booklet: [Assured & Assured Shorthold Tenancies - A Guide for Tenants](#)

If you require any further information or advice please do not hesitate to contact us:

University of Sunderland Students' Union
Welfare Advice Centre
1st Floor Wearmouth Hall
Chester Road
Sunderland
SR1 3SD

Opening Times: Monday to Wednesday 9-30 to 5-30
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