

Handy Guide to Renting a Property

The Advantages of Renting

These days, an increasing number of people are renting and the quality and range of rented accommodation is better than ever.

Renting is usually cheaper than owning and bills are more predictable too, which is great news for those who prefer stable finances. And with fewer outgoings, you can save more.

Renting offers more flexibility than owning - you can move somewhere else relatively quickly - useful if you plan to move for a new job or are going away to study. Also, it's less hassle than being an owner as you won't need to pay for property maintenance - most of that will be done for you.

What to Look For on Viewings

When you have decided on properties that you like, you or your agent can arrange a viewing of the property.

Make the most of this opportunity by:

- Checking how well the property has been maintained - look at gutters, windows, roofs
- Noting how much storage space there is
- Checking to see how the place is heated and how well insulated it looks - this will affect your bills
- Asking to see the gas safety certificate and operating instructions for electrical items. Are there enough sockets for your needs?
- Finding out which furnishings will be in the property when you move in. Does it meet the fire safety regulations?
- Running the taps, bath and shower, and flushing the toilet. Do they all work? Ask to be shown that the heating and hot water works - and that windows open
- Asking yourself how secure it feels? Is there access from rear gardens and alleys? What are the locks like - many insurers require five lever mortise locks on all entry doors and window locks
- For flats, asking if you have your own secure post box. How clean are common areas - how often are they cleaned and by whom? How are any common grounds maintained? If there is a vehicle space, what's parked in it now - if there is a rust heap, ask when it will be cleared
- Finding out how close the transport links are - is it an easy commute to work or university and how close are other amenities, shops, etc?
- Visiting at different times to establish how safe/quiet the area is
- Asking if road works are planned or new houses are going up nearby - this will add to noise
- Talking to existing tenants (if they are still there) and neighbours. Ask them what it's like to live there.
- Ask tenants what the landlord is like
- If the landlord will be looking after the management, asking if you can meet him

Good places go fast, so here are our tips for getting ahead of the rest to secure the best property:

- Start viewing in good time. A lot of property to rent won't be available to move in to for at least four weeks, or even longer on student houses where new lets are often agreed months in advance
- Have a cash reservation fee ready (and get a receipt for it)
- Have copies of references from your employer and previous landlords available, together with your bank details, documents proving your ID and full address with postcodes for the last three years - the agent will need these for the reference check
- Be ready to sign a tenancy application form - this will allow the agent to check your references and run a credit check

- If you think you may need a guarantor, get this set up in good time (and check if the agent or landlord will accept one).

Reference Checks

If you like the property, you will have to pass reference checks. If there is a fee for this, it is usually non-refundable, even if the reference check rejects you as a tenant.

If you pass, you may be asked to pay a reservation fee or holding deposit. Normally, you will lose this if you change your mind and decide not to take the property.

Budget carefully - allow for council tax and the cost of all utilities, which you'll normally have to pay for. However, if it's a short-term let, the council tax and some utilities may be included in the rent.

You can find out the cost of council tax from your local authority and get quotes from insurers to cover your possessions. Make sure you always compare like with like - most tenancies express the rent as £X per calendar month which is about 4.35 times the cost of a weekly rent.

Once you think you have found somewhere you like, things to ask the agent are:

- What bills (if any) are included in the rent? Are there any charges for the cleaning of communal areas etc?
- How much is the deposit and when is the rent reviewed?
- If you are on local housing allowance or a student, will they consider you?
- Will they accept guarantors?
- Will there be a fixed term in the tenancy and, if so, for how long? Is the tenancy extendable after the fixed term has ended?
- How many people have viewed it already and how long has it been on the market for?

Understanding Your Rights and Responsibilities as a Tenant

Even before you start searching for a property to rent, it's important to understand the legal aspects of being a tenant.

When you become a tenant, you take on certain responsibilities in exchange for certain rights. Your tenancy agreement will typically be 4-5 pages long and very detailed. It lists your responsibilities so read it carefully. As a minimum, it will show:

- The names of the landlord and tenant
- How much the rent and deposit is
- When the rent will be reviewed
- The address for the landlord or agent who will be looking after the property.

The main things you must do are as follows:

- Pay rent on time - normally one month in advance
- Pay other bills. In most long-term lets, you'll be paying council tax, utilities (including water), TV licence and telephone charges
- Respect neighbours - so no making noise, putting rubbish in the wrong place or obstructing common areas
- Look after the property.

The agent's job might be to market the property, arrange signing of agreements and payment of the first month's rent and deposit.

After that, you may find you are dealing directly with a landlord who will look after the management. However, most landlords tend to leave the management up to the letting agent.

The good news is that you are not expected to maintain the building - that's the landlord's job. But you should behave in such a way that the building is properly cared for.

Moving In Day

Great, you are ready to move in. Here are some tips to make moving in day as smooth as possible:

- Use a good removal firm - seek recommendations from friends. Look for members of the British Association of Removers who operate under a strict code of conduct.
- Try to avoid Fridays which is the busiest day
- Save time and cost by doing some of the packing yourself
- Check out the best value utility contracts for your new property well in advance and read your meters on moving in day
- Redirect post well beforehand
- Prepare a standard letter to notify utility providers, banks and anyone else who needs to know what your new address is
- Take out contents insurance to protect your possessions
- Set up your standing order to pay rent so it's in the agent's or landlord's account on time.

Source: Rightmove.