

Housing Scams

Looking for a place to call home can be a nerve-wracking and stressful experience. Don't let yourself fall into any traps by keeping an eye out for the scams below.

1. Receipt Rip Off

A con artist posing as a landlord will ask for money to be wired via Western Union as a sign of good faith that a tenant is serious about letting a property. The landlord will ask that funds are wired to the tenant's friend or relative to demonstrate that they can afford the property. The landlord will ask for proof of receipt and will then withdraw the funds using the transfer details.

Never agree to wire money for a deposit, no matter how plausible the story. Most landlords should accept either a cheque or bankers' draft.

2. Complete Liability

Rogue landlords may suggest that tenants can pay more rent each month instead of a deposit and that at the end of the tenancy they will receive this extra money back if there are no breakages. This doesn't happen and the rogues are able to pocket all the additional money paid.

Although tempting if you're short of cash, be wary of landlords who suggest these options. Having a properly protected deposit is the only legal way to ensure that your deposit will be handled fairly at the end of your tenancy.

3. Let and Run

Con artists break into empty properties and then rent them out as their own. Unsuspecting tenants hand over large sums of money as a deposit and rent, at which point the con artists disappears. When the real owners of the property realise what has happened, the tenants are evicted because in the eyes of the law they are squatters.

Never hand over cash until you have been given the landlord's name and a UK contact address — they are required by law to provide this. You can check who owns the property by searching on the Land Registry website and paying a small fee.

4. Duped into debt

Rogue landlords often charge extortionate amounts for hidden costs not previously discussed, such as fees for a tenancy inspection and then 'conveniently' forget to tell tenants about it. This means the tenant has a debt that they may not even be aware of. These debts increase over time and when tenants attempt to leave the property, they are lumbered with a huge bill that they are expected to pay — although they are not legally obliged to.

Ask for written confirmation of exactly what you will have to pay for over the lifetime of the tenancy. Remember you are not liable for a debt if you didn't agree to it within the tenancy agreement.

5. Disappearing deposits

Although a legal requirement, some rogue landlords may try to avoid putting tenants' deposits in a tenancy deposit scheme. This leaves the tenant in an extremely vulnerable position if there is a dispute. Rogue landlords often claim money handed over prior to entering the property was an administrative fee as opposed to a deposit.

Always ask which authorised deposit scheme your landlord will be putting your deposit into.