

LOOKING GUIDE

Your comprehensive guide to
finding the perfect house.

THINGS TO LOOK
OUT FOR

CHOOSING
FLATMATES

CHECKLIST





WELCOME FROM YOUR CO-PRESIDENT (WELFARE & DIVERSITY)

Welcome, and thank you for picking up your copy of the Looking Guide! The aim of this booklet is to support you as you make your first steps toward finding your home for next year, and to give you the best tools and advice possible so that you can feel confident in your decisions going forward.

House-hunting can be very difficult; it's quite the balancing act. From finding housemates who you could actually live with every day for the next year, to making sure that wherever you end up has everything you want and need while still being affordable, there's lots to think about! I'm currently in my third student house, so I know as well as anyone how hard it can be to get everything right. That's why I wanted to put together this guide – so that you can learn from some of my mistakes and feel empowered to find the perfect living situation for you.

We want house-hunting to be as smooth and easy for you as possible. The Advice and Support Centre at the Students' Union runs 'Housemating' events to help you find people to live with, and when it comes to signing for a house, they'll also check your contracts! We really are there to support you every step of the way, and are firm believers that there are no stupid questions. So whatever you're not sure about, always feel free to come in and ask.

- JACK KILKER

INTRODUCTION

For most students looking to rent off-campus, there are two options: either live in a shared student household or live with a resident landlord.

If you're intending to share with other students, think carefully about who you want to share with as this can have a big impact on your year in that house. Some people will prove to be wonderful housemates, but some might not, and it's best to find out as much about someone as you can before you sign. Once you have signed your tenancy agreement, you may be liable for the rent and bills in that house for the rest of the agreement, even if you decide to move out.

It's also important to know when to look. We strongly advise taking your time over finding a house you're all happy with, or even a group of housemates that you're completely happy with. Do not worry that if you haven't signed by the end of term one you won't find anywhere and all the good houses will be gone: this simply isn't the case.

If you take your time and choose carefully, you're more likely to get a better deal, and to have a better year.

The last thing you need to know is where to look! The most obvious, but not always the most helpful place to look, is with local letting agents, but these will charge you administration fees, so we'd suggest a few of these options first:

- » HouseSearch (housesearch.rhul.ac.uk)
- » Local Estate Agents - this may often be the most expensive option due to administration costs.
- » Move'm - an online service that we use to survey houses, landlords and letting agents in the local area, to get an honest representation of what it's like to live locally.
- » Word of Mouth - a house recommended by other students is often going to have the most honest representation.
- » Students' Union Housemating Sessions - running throughout the year, the first two are 25 November and 3 December. Both from 4pm upstairs in the Students' Union.
- » The 'SURHUL Housemating' & 'Student Housemate Scheme' Facebook pages.

CHOOSING YOUR HOUSEMATES

This is a really important part of your decision about where you're going to live next, as there are so many different things to think about! How many people do you want to live with? Are you living with some of the same people that you do now, friends from your course or people from your club or society? Do you want to live in a social house or one where everyone does their own thing?

All of this means that it's really important to take your time in making these decisions; don't rush into anything, because you will be living with these people for a year. If you're already living with people, think about how you fit together; have you had any big disputes? Is someone especially messy, or maybe even just a little bit too tidy? Are you a party house, do you prefer nights in, or are you a mixture of the two?

Of course, there's no way to ensure that everyone fits together perfectly, there might be some hiccups, and you might not want to do exactly the same things as your housemates all of the time, but as long as you're able to communicate and to appreciate both your similarities and your differences, then you should be fine! It's just about taking the time to make sure you know somebody well enough, before you sign onto a house with them!

To help you think about the types of people you might live with, or the living situation that would best work for you, check out the handy housemate guide (opposite) that we've put together for you.

WHICH HOUSEMATE WILL YOU BE?

THE BOSS:

Every house needs one. They make sure that all the bills are paid and that the house is cleaned when the landlord is coming to visit. They enforce house rules and make sure the rest of the other housemates stick to it. Once their clean-loving, organised nature is revealed, housemates are quick to take advantage. The boss is often solving problems and offering advice. Sometimes referred to as the 'blanket', this housemate is a good listener and is empathetic with a strong nurturing personality and wouldn't mind tidying or cleaning up after you.

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THE GEEK:

Always on top of their work, always up to date, they will never miss a lecture. They are always prepared for the next exam; although they may say 'I haven't revised at all', we all know they have. They can be very useful during exam time, as they can help you with work, but also they can motivate you to work as well. This housemate is often very organised and will help sort out bills and any paperwork.

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THE PARTY ANIMAL:

Eat, Sleep, Rave, Repeat. The party animal is always ready to go out: the next big SU event, you know they'll be there. You can always count on them to talk you into going out. They have a very loud personality. They can be heard anywhere within the house, whether that's holding a conversation or carrying out a day-to-day task at maximum volume. Note: Do not challenge this housemate to drinking competitions. This housemate entertains everyone and keeps the fun levels up.

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THE DODGER:

Pots and pans left uncleaned on the kitchen counter? These probably belong to the dodger. They're incredibly loveable, especially when you can see them working out the best way to get out of a communal vacuuming session. They'll have an arsenal of excuses up their sleeve as to why they can't help out with household things, many of which will be valid, as they'll probably be brilliantly dedicated to anything (and everything) else they do. Start learning some tricks to give them no way out of doing the cleaning as soon as you move in!



A WARNING

Growing numbers of students are falling victim to scams after responding to advertisements online. They pay cash or make a money transfer as a deposit and/or for rent for a property by someone claiming to be the owner or agent. They are given a tenancy agreement, but when they turn up to move in as arranged, there is no-one to meet them and they subsequently discover that the owner or agent is someone else. By then the perpetrator has disappeared with their money and the students are homeless and several hundred pounds out of pocket. It's best never to pay any money until you've visited the property - and if it looks too good to be true, it probably is!

VIEWING A PROPERTY

For your safety and security you should not visit a property alone. Whenever you go to look at a property, you should inspect it thoroughly. Before you visit a property draw up a checklist or use the attached checklist, which contains information about things you expect to find in student accommodation, and things that you should definitely be looking out for.

CHECKLIST

- If there are five or more bedrooms and the property has three or more floors, ask to see the **HMO licence** (House in Multiple Occupation).

- If the landlord claims that the property has been accredited by Runnymede council, **check the list of accredited properties** on the council's website: runnymede.gov.uk

- Grounds** – make sure they are clear of rubbish, especially if you have to maintain them.

- Outdoor shed** – Are you allowed to use it? Is it clear of rubbish? Does it contain gardening equipment for you to use? If so, does it work?

- Side entrance – Check it has a **secure lockable door** to the back of the property.

- Walls and general structure** – Check there are no cracks etc. which could indicate that the property may not be structurally safe.

- Roof** – This should appear to be secure, with no missing slates, no broken gutters, and no moss or weeds growing out of the roof/gutters.

- Doors** - Main doors should have a secure locking facility, not just an ordinary Yale type, and not locks which need a key to open the door from the inside.

- Ask who else has **keys to the property**.

- If there was a fire, **could you get out of the property safely?**

- Check that there are **smoke detectors** in bedrooms and on staircases.

- Carbon monoxide detectors** – If provided, they should be just below the ceiling level in the rooms that contain a gas appliance. The only safe ones look like smoke detectors and sound an alarm to wake you up if there was a CO leak. They can be bought for as little as £20.

- Make sure there are no sooty stains on or around gas appliances that might indicate that they are not working properly and that they are not situated in a bedroom or an unvented cupboard. **Carbon monoxide kills**, so check there is a valid gas safety certificate. It is a legal requirement for all gas appliances to be tested annually by a Gas Safe registered engineer, and your landlord is responsible for ensuring that the tests are carried out.
- Heating – Check that there is **sufficient heating** and that it is suitable for your needs.
 - Electric wiring** – Check that there are enough electrical sockets and that none of them are loose or have burn marks on/around them.
 - Ask to see the landlord's **electrical safety certificate**.
 - Ask the landlord if he could show you a copy of the Energy Performance Certificate.
 - Water and waste pipes – Make sure there are **no leaking pipes**.
 - Damp – Make sure there is no sign of **mould or damp discoloration** on ceilings and walls (especially in the bathroom or bedrooms).
 - Pests – Check for any signs of **animal life** – insects, mouse droppings or slug trails.
 - Floors – Check that carpets are **clean, in good condition** and are **properly fitted**, especially on the staircase. Also check that there are **no cracks/tears** in the kitchen/bathroom flooring.
 - Furniture – Make sure there is **enough for everyone** and that it is in good condition.
 - Ask if the contents you see in the accommodation will be there when you move in or if they belong to the current occupants - **ask to see the inventory**.

- Furniture and Fire regulations - Second-hand, old, furniture is often supplied in rented accommodation and could be a fire hazard. Unless it can be proved this furniture was purchased before 1950, it should have the manufacturer's label on it saying it meets the requirements of the **Furnishing Regulations 1988**. Check this carefully.

- Bedroom - Make sure that it has everything you expect: a bed (with clean mattress), adequate lighting, a reading lamp, wardrobe, easy chair, storage space, bookshelves, desk or table and study chair, as well as adequate heating. All the bedrooms should be big enough and have a window which opens directly outside to provide **natural light and ventilation**.

- **Kitchen** - Make sure that it is big enough, with adequate units and worktops to store and prepare food. If there is not a separate living room, there should be enough room for a dining table and chairs.

- Cooker and fridge - Make sure they are in good working order, clean inside and out and are going to be **big enough for you and your housemates**.

- Other appliances such as vacuum cleaner, washing machine, freezer, microwave, and dishwasher are not always provided in rented properties. If they come with your property, ask if the instruction booklets are available and check that the **landlord** will be responsible for any breakdowns.

- Bathroom ventilation - If there is no natural ventilation, i.e. window, there should be a **working ventilation fan**.

- Bath/shower - Make sure that there is a clean and **undamaged sealant** around bath or shower and that none of the taps are dripping. Also, check the taps and shower to get an idea of the **water pressure** in the building: this is quite a large problem for the landlord to fix, so if the water pressure is low, you're probably best off steering clear!

- WC - Check that the **flush** works and that the **seat and lid** is not damaged.

DEPOSITS AND ADMIN FEES

Once you've found a house that you're happy with, with people that you're happy to live with, the next steps are all about actually securing your home! There are three big things that you're going to be asked for to secure the property, and one of these is a holding fee.

The holding fee is a percentage of your monthly rent, normally either one month's rent or slightly higher, and this confirms that the property has been taken off of the market for you. This will normally be deducted either from the amount which you will pay as your tenancy deposit, or will constitute your first month's rent. It's also normally non-refundable, so don't hand it over until you're 100% certain you want this house!

Your tenancy deposit is held to ensure that the property is kept in a good condition by the tenants and is properly maintained as the contract dictates. Depending on the letting agent, the sum required for this can be anywhere between one and two times the cost of one month's rent, and any deductions made from this are at an amount which covers outstanding bills or rent and any damage the landlord can prove you've made to the property or contents.

Tenancy Deposit Schemes (TDS) were introduced in April 2007 to make sure that tenants' deposits would be kept safe for the duration of their tenancies and would be returned to them in full within 10 days of the end of their tenancies unless there were legitimate reasons for withholding some or all of the deposit. If a disagreement between a landlord and tenant should arise over deductions, an alternative dispute resolution service can investigate.

Since then, all landlords and agents have had a legal obligation to ensure that any deposit paid to them for an assured shorthold tenancy (AST) is protected by a TDS. If your tenancy has a rental income of £100,000 or less per year you are likely to have an AST. You should receive notification that your deposit has been protected within 30 days of you paying it.

You'll also be asked to pay an admin fee as well, and this is fairly standard practice with most letting agents. This essentially covers the costs of the work the letting agents have done to set you up with your property. Usually this is around £150, though it can be slightly higher. If this is starting to seem extortionate, you can seek advice from the Students' Union.

GOOD LUCK!

Setting out to find housemates and somewhere to live for the next year can seem like a daunting task, partly because there are so many people you could possibly live with, and so many houses! The most important thing to remember is not to rush into anything, as you will most likely be required to cover the rent and bills for the property, even if your situation changes and you decide not to live there any longer.

The Students' Union is there to support you, be that through our Advice and Support Centre or our Housing Campaign. If you're not sure about a landlord, you want your contract to be checked before you sign it, or you need some advice or representation in dealing with your landlord or letting agent, then our Welfare Advisers are there to help you with all of these things. You can book an appointment with them at the Students' Union Reception, or you can email advice@su.rhul.ac.uk.

As your Students' Union, we would like to wish you the best of luck as you move forwards in finding your house for next year! Just remember: don't rush, and be sure of who you're living with and what you want from your house!

USEFUL CONTACTS

ADVICE AND SUPPORT CENTRE

Based on the first floor of the Students' Union, we offer you the opportunity to discuss any concerns you may have and receive advice from our team of experienced and professional advisers.

Web: su.rhul.ac.uk/advice

Tel: 01784 246700

Email: advice@su.rhul.ac.uk

HOUSESEARCH

HouseSearch lets you search for shared houses, one-bedroom properties, flats and lodgings in Egham, Englefield Green and the local area.

Web: housesearch.rhul.ac.uk

