

STUDENT HOUSING GUIDE

While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information contained in this publication, it should not be regarded as a definitive statement of the law.





Introduction

Finding a cheap, comfortable roof over your head is never easy.

However, when renting, knowing what to look out for and understanding exactly what you are agreeing to is half the battle!

If you have any problems with your housing, your students' union welfare office and college accommodation office are there to help. So too are the agencies listed at the back of this booklet.

This brochure has been produced by the NUS-USI Student Movement, Housing Rights Service and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, in consultation with Queen's University Belfast and the University of Ulster.

Remember

If you like a particular property but the landlord decides not to rent to you, they are entitled to do so. However where you feel you have been denied access to accommodation because of disability, race, religion, gender or sexual orientation this may contravene anti-discriminatory legislation and you should seek advice from your students' union welfare officer or NUS-USI.

UNIVERSITY & COLLEGE

Most universities and some further education colleges are able to offer some accommodation of their own. Priority is usually given to first year students, students with a disability and international students. Contact the accommodation office of the university or college concerned.

The most common arrangement is a single study bedroom with access to kitchen facilities, known as 'single self-catering'.

In addition, some universities and colleges have accommodation that offers a certain number of meals (eg breakfast and evening meal). Some will also own or manage houses which they rent to students on a shared basis.

Costs

Rent levels vary depending on the types of accommodation. Make sure you can afford the accommodation.

The rent may include the cost of heat and light, but check to make sure. In addition, a deposit may be needed to cover any damages or other costs. Most institutions will return the deposit at the end of the letting period, but some do not.

Remember

Do not pay any money until you decide to accept the property. If you are asked to pay money to an agent, then this may be illegal and you should seek advice.

PRIVATE SECTOR

There are several places to start looking:

- www.nistudentpad.co.uk
- student union/college notice board
- newsagents' window
- newspaper to let ads
- estate agents

nistudentpad.co.uk is a comprehensive and constantly changing database of private and university properties available in Northern Ireland and the UK.

housingadviceNI.org (Housing Rights Service) provides advice on private rented accommodation.

Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMO)

A shared property is called a House in Multiple Occupation (HMO). It means the property has to meet certain standards and the property manager must comply with the HMO Management Regulations. Ask if the house is HMO Registered with the Housing Executive.

For advice on HMOs visit: nihe.gov.uk/hmo


AnServe is a 24/7 answering service for incidents relating to HMO registered properties: **08000 213 155**

SHAC Housing Association

SHAC offers students and young people quality accommodation across Northern Ireland.

Costs

Private landlords are very unlikely to include the costs of heat and light within the rent. Tenants are also expected to pay a month's rent in advance and a deposit that can be the equivalent of a month's rent.



Housing Benefit is not generally available to students. However, if you have dependant children or are disabled or are entitled to other social security benefits, you may be eligible for Housing Benefit.

Check out your eligibility with your students' union or nearest Housing Benefit office.

LETTING AGREEMENTS & LEGAL RIGHTS

Letting agreements

Regardless of the type of accommodation, you will generally be asked to sign a letting agreement. These place you under a contractual obligation to comply with all the points of that agreement.

A clause is often included which prevents you moving out of the accommodation until a new tenant has been found; until then, you could remain liable for the rent.

All agreements must be read thoroughly before being signed.

Most students will be living in private rental accommodation with basic legal rights. If you experience problems, seek advice (see the list of agencies at the back of this booklet) as soon as possible.

Legal rights

As a tenant you have the right to:

- **A rent book**

A legal requirement that includes the name, address and phone number of the landlord and agent, rent payable (and rates if applicable) when it's due, and details of any other payments you are required to make. (See Appendix 3). A rent book must be provided within 28 days of a tenancy commencing. The local council environmental health department enforces this law. For a sample of a rent book go to: nihe.gov.uk/rent_book.pdf

- **Freedom from harassment and illegal eviction**

This includes cutting off your electricity or water supply, changing the locks, interfering with your possessions or threatening behaviour. Harassment may also include a landlord turning up at the property unannounced. The landlord must be allowed reasonable access to the house, to inspect and carry out repairs or in emergency situations. You must be given reasonable notice of their visit, ideally at least 24 hours. Always seek advice immediately. The environmental health department of your local council has powers to investigate such actions.

- **Notice to quit**

All tenants have the right to at least 4 weeks written notice to quit before any court action to evict can start. If you have lived in the property for five years or more you may be entitled to a longer period.

- **Due process of law**

If a landlord terminates your tenancy, and you refuse to move out, the landlord can only recover possession through court proceedings. If they try to evict you without a court order then this could be an illegal eviction.

- **Default tenancy term of 6 months**

Where the length of the tenancy has not been agreed at the outset, the law says that the tenancy must last for at least 6 months.

- **Default repair obligations**

Where it is not clear who is responsible for carrying out repairs, the law sets out default repairing obligations for both you and your landlord.

Remember:

Some landlords or agents may ask you to provide a guarantor.

This is someone who guarantees to make payments if you fail to do so yourself.

Failure by either you as the tenant to make payments, or your guarantor to make payments (following your failure to do so), could result in either of you being pursued for the money in the Small Claims Court.



**Belfast City Council Environmental Health
(028) 9027 0428
belfastcity.gov.uk/environmentalhealth**

Can provide home safety checks which reduce your risk of having an accident at home. They offer free home safety checks for residents within the Belfast area, particularly seniors and parents with young children.

The checks offer tips on all aspects of home safety, as well as specialist advice on topics like heating and energy saving.

A room-by-room inspection usually takes around 30 minutes and all checks are carried out by two uniformed members of staff with identity cards.

Repairs

Check your tenancy agreement to see who is actually responsible for the repair. Never assume it is the landlord's responsibility. Remember also that if you do not have a tenancy agreement or if your tenancy agreement does not set out who is responsible for carrying out repairs then default repairing obligations will apply (www.dsdni.gov.uk/repair).

If, however, you discover that the landlord is responsible and they have failed to carry out the repairs you have told them about, contact the Housing Executive's HMO Unit or the environmental health department of your local council if the disrepair represents a danger to your health and/or safety.

For advice on repair obligations go to:
dsdni.gov.uk/repairs.pdf

Remember

As a tenant you have certain basic rights. However, you also have responsibilities to the landlord, your flatmates and the local community in which you live.

Be a good neighbour

Be reasonable in your behaviour. You should be aware that your university, landlord and/or police can take disciplinary action against you for anti-social behaviour and you could also end up with a criminal record.

Leaving before the tenancy agreement has expired

If you move out before the period of the tenancy agreement has expired, the landlord will still expect and be legally entitled to the full rent agreed at the outset. You should seek advice from your students' union welfare office/college accommodation office. The landlord may permit you to arrange a replacement tenant to prevent any financial loss.

Getting your deposit back

If you paid a returnable deposit, and if there is no rent outstanding and no breakages etc, the deposit **must** be returned, in full, at the end of the tenancy.

Reasonable wear and tear cannot be used as grounds for withholding all or part of your deposit. If the deposit is withheld without good reason by the landlord at the end of the tenancy, seek advice immediately. Housing Rights Service can provide advice to you about taking an action in the Small Claims Court.

If you want to move out before the end of the agreed tenancy period, getting any deposit back may be a problem and you should seek specialist advice.



SAFETY

Carbon monoxide

Over the last decade a number of students have died and thousands have become ill as a result of being poisoned by silent, odourless carbon monoxide fumes from faulty gas appliances and solid fuel room heaters. Regulations state that all landlords must have their gas appliances checked for safety every twelve months. They should provide all tenants with a copy of the safety check record, visit: [hseni.gov.uk](https://www.hseni.gov.uk)

NUS-USI advise that you demand this evidence from your landlord/agent. If you have any concerns, contact the Housing Executive HMO Unit **03448 920 900**.

For advice on carbon monoxide:
[hseni.gov.uk/watchout](https://www.hseni.gov.uk/watchout)

Fire, furniture and electrical

- Make sure that an automatic (electric) fire detection and alarm system (or smoke detectors) has been fitted in appropriate places within the property, and check to see that there are fire blankets and a fire extinguisher in the kitchen. Do not tamper with this equipment - it could save your life!
- All furniture and furnishings should be made from fire resistant materials with a compliance label attached.
- Check all electrical plug sockets for signs of damage, and that there are sufficient socket outlets for your needs.

Personal safety

When viewing property always take someone along with you or inform a friend about your plans. If asked to pay a deposit by the landlord/agent, ensure you get a receipt as well as contact details.

ACCEPTING A PROPERTY

Take your time and do not be harassed into accepting the first property you see.

Many of the best flats/bedsits or houses are passed on through personal contact and it may be possible to 'take-over' a tenancy from friends or other students, provided the landlord agrees to this in advance.

Once you are satisfied with the accommodation and the nature of the tenancy agreement between you and the landlord, you should then make sure you obtain the following:

- A copy of the tenancy agreement/lease and any other document(s) you have signed - ***read carefully as your tenancy agreement is a legally binding contract.***
- The name, address and phone number of your landlord.
- A rent book - this is a legal requirement.
- Details of any payments, other than the rent, which you will be required to make e.g. rates.
- A furniture inventory (Checklist 2). This is a list of all the contents, furniture, etc in the property. If you have already been given an inventory, check through it and note any items which are missing or damaged. If no inventory is provided, draw up your own list. Sign and date it, give a copy to the landlord. This is important if any dispute arises as to damage/loss etc, and in the event of the landlord withholding your deposit.



CHECKLIST 1 - Finding a place to live

Take this checklist with you when you are house hunting. There are a number of important things to look out for. You should be satisfied about the following:

The Neighbourhood

- Is it convenient? Check out the public transport.
- Are there good local shops with late opening hours, community/recreational facilities in the area?
- Is there good street lighting? If you are concerned as to how 'safe' the area is, check with your students' union welfare office.

The Accommodation

- Are there signs of dampness?
- How much furniture is provided? Is it adequate? What condition is it in? Does it meet current fire safety regulations?
- What form of heating is supplied? Is it working? Will the accommodation be easy to heat?
- What cooking facilities are available?
- Is there a fridge - does it work?
- Are enough kitchen utensils/crockery provided?
- Is there enough space for all of you to cook?
- Are there enough electrical sockets - what condition are they in?
- Is there sufficient natural light and ventilation?
- Is there a desk/table you can use for studying?
- Is there hot and cold running water?

- Are sufficient wardrobes/storage areas provided?
- Do you have to provide your own bed linen/ blankets?
- Is there an automatic (electric) fire detection and alarm system, or smoke detectors, are they working and is there a means of escape in the event of a fire?
- Is there a pre-pay meter for your electric supply - if the property is a HMO then THIS IS ILLEGAL. Ask the electricity supplier to remove it and report it to your Housing Executive HMO Unit.
- Can you get out of the front and back door without a key? You should be able to.
- Are the doors secure, with good locks? How many keys are there and who has access to these?
- Are the windows secure - are any cracked or broken? Do they close properly? Can they be they locked?

Outside

- If considering a house or ground floor flat, could someone get over the yard wall easily? Is the yard door secure?
- Do you have access to an outside clothes line/other drying facilities?
- Has the landlord supplied you with a bin?
- What are the rubbish disposal arrangements?
- Does the roof look sound? Are there slates/tiles missing? Check for leaks, eg tell-tale signs on ceilings.
- Have the gutters got weeds growing out of them? Is there any guttering missing?
- Is any of the woodwork (eg doors/ windows) unsafe or rotting?

Things to ask the landlord

- Ask about the nature of the tenancy agreement. The agreement you make with the landlord is a legal contract.
- What are the terms on which you are being offered the accommodation? Do not sign anything until you are sure.
- Do you want to stay over the summer? If not, ask for a 9 month lease.
- How much is the rent - is it payable weekly, monthly or every 4 weeks? How is it to be paid, ie to an agent? Can it be increased during the period of your lease?
- Are the rates included in the rent or separate and who is responsible for them? Are there any other charges, eg for electricity or extra services?
- How much money will you have to pay before taking up the tenancy? eg. rent in advance, a deposit? If you are asked for 'key' money, this is ILLEGAL.
- If you have to pay a deposit, is it returnable and under what circumstances can it be withheld? You should ask for a receipt for any deposits paid.
- Who is responsible for repairs?
- Are there any restrictions on friends staying?
- Can you keep any pets?
- Are you expected to share any of the facilities/amenities with others?
- Does the landlord have insurance cover for the property?
- Does furniture comply with current fire safety regulations?
- Do you need to take out insurance to cover damage/loss/theft of your own possessions?

- Do you have an emergency out of hour's number for the landlord or agent? If the property is HMO Registered you can contact AnServe on 08000 213 155 to report any incidents.
- In what circumstances can the landlord come into the property?
- Who can end the tenancy? On what grounds?
- Is there an Energy Performance Certificate for the property?
- Is there a Gas Safety Certificate for the property?

When moving in

- Take a reading of your electricity and gas meter and then contact your electricity and gas supplier to arrange for them to read the meter.
- Check whether you need a television licence - one licence will cover all the sets in a shared household, but individual households in separate bedsits will each need their own.
- Is the house clean?
- Are there any repairs which need doing? If so, tell the landlord in writing.
- Have you made an inventory of all the furniture and has it been agreed with the landlord? (See Checklist 2)
- Have you paid a deposit and if so have you got a receipt?
- Do you know your landlord's address?
- Do you need insurance to cover your own possessions?

LANDLORD'S DETAILS

Name: _____

Address: _____

Tel Nos: _____

AGENT'S DETAILS

Name: _____

Address: _____

Tel Nos: _____

YOUR RENT DETAILS

Monthly rent: £ _____

Capital value of the house: £ _____

Amount of rates payable: £ _____

The amount of any rates included in the rent or payable in addition to the rent and the period covered by each payments.

The amount and description of any other payment which the tenant is required to make in addition to rent and rates eg heating.

Deposit: £ _____

Rent: £ _____

Period: _____

Start date of lease: _____

CHECKLIST 2 - Inventory

Many students take photographs of the facilities and furniture!

Please ensure that you make an inventory of all furniture and agree this with your landlord. Include details of the number and condition of the facilities/items of furniture.

Property address: _____

Tenant's name: _____

Living Room

- Sofa
- Armchair
- Carpet
- Curtains
- Table
- Lamps
- Other _____

Kitchen

- Cutlery
- Crockery
- Curtains
- Pots and Pans
- Washing Machine
- Fridge
- Cooker
- Table and chairs
- Sink
- Other _____

Bedroom(s)

- Beds
- Wardrobes
- Carpets
- Curtains
- Other _____

Hallway/Staircase

- Carpets
- Curtains
- Other _____

Bathroom/Toilet

- Bath
- Shower
- Sink
- Flooring
- Curtains
- Other _____

Signed: _____ (Tenant)

Date: _____

Signed: _____ (Landlord)

Date: _____

FURTHER INFORMATION



Housing Rights Service

Middleton Buildings, 4th Floor, 10-12 High Street Belfast BT1 2BA

Tel: (028) 9024 5640

Email: hqs@housingrights.org.uk

Web: www.housingrights.org.uk

www.housingadviceNI.org

www.housingadviceNI.org is a public advice and information website delivered by Housing Rights Service which provides reliable independent housing advice and information to the public in Northern Ireland, including a dedicated area for young people.

The logo for the Housing Executive consists of the words 'Housing Executive' in a bold, black, sans-serif font, enclosed within a black rectangular border.

Housing Executive

Northern Ireland Housing Executive

HMO Central Unit, 2 Adelaide Street, Belfast BT2 8PB

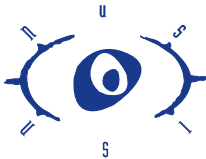
Belfast HMO Office, Lagan House, 95 Ann Street, Belfast BT1 3HH

HMO Regional Office, 19 Abbey Street, Coleraine BT52 1DU

Tel: 03448 920 900

Email: hmobelfast@nihe.gov.uk / hmocoleraine@nihe.gov.uk

Web: www.nihe.gov.uk/hmo



NUS-USI

42 Dublin Road, Belfast BT2 7HN

Tel: (028) 9024 4641

Email: info@nistudents.org

Web: www.nistudents.org



SHAC Housing Association

33 May Street, Belfast BT1 4NA

Tel: 08450 743 431

Email: info@shac.org.uk

Web: www.shac.org.uk



Belfast City Council - Environmental Health Service

Offer free home safety checks for residents within the Belfast area, particularly seniors and parents with young children. The checks offer tips on all aspects of home safety, as well as specialist advice on topics like heating and energy saving. A room-by-room inspection takes around 30 minutes and is carried out by two uniformed members of staff with identity cards.

Tel: (028) 9027 0428

Email: environmentalhealthservice@belfastcity.gov.uk

Web: www.belfastcity.gov.uk/environmentalhealth

This leaflet is available in alternative formats.

Please contact:

HMO Central Unit

2 Adelaide Street

Belfast

BT2 8PB

Tel: (028) 9031 8931

**Housing
Executive**

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www.nihe.gov.uk