

Advice Column – Finding a good Letting Agent

I've just graduated and plan to rent a place with friends. We thought it would be easiest to find somewhere through a letting agent but I've heard they can sometimes be a rip-off. Any tips on how to find a good one?

You're right to be cautious. Use our top tips to avoid problems:

- Shop around. Ask for details of the services each agent provides and what they charge for. Not all agents make additional charges, and the amounts they do charge can vary.
- It is a criminal offence for a letting agency to charge you just to register with them. You shouldn't have to pay any fees until the agency has found accommodation for you. If you think that an agency is acting illegally, contact your local council's trading standards officer or tenancy relations officer.
- Check whether the agent is a member of a trade body such as ARLA, NAEA, RICS or NALS, which require members to have client money protection arrangements. This should prevent you losing money if the agent goes out of business. They also require members to have a complaints procedure.
- Check whether the agent has a procedure in place to deal with complaints including access to independent redress, for example, an ombudsman scheme.
- If you are charged a tenancy deposit, ask the agent for the details of the tenancy deposit protection scheme they use. Agents and landlords are required by law to protect deposits for assured shorthold tenancies in a Government approved scheme.
- Ask the agent whether the landlord has the lender's permission to rent out the property. If not, you could be evicted with minimal notice if your landlord gets into arrears with their mortgage and the property is repossessed.
- Get free, confidential, independent advice from your local Citizens Advice Bureau (see www.adviceguide.org.uk or your local phone book for contact details) or local housing aid centre.

August 09