

## How to find a flat or house share

Living in a shared house or flat with other students is a common source of accommodation whilst at university. Some of the advantages of this option can include cost and your ability to make the place your own.

The process of securing a room can appear daunting at first, particularly if you are new to London. However fear not London's private rental market is vast and if you are effective in your search you are sure to find something suitable.

### **Step 1 – Who am I going to live with?**

This is an obvious step, but also a very important one. It may be that you know a group of people already, if this is the case you will need to consider whether you would get on living with them. You should be thinking about people's habits, schedules and personal tastes.

Students looking to form a new group or find a spare room within an existing house share with other Westminster Students can make use of the University's Housing Team Facebook group. It's called Westminster Private Housing and features a diverse mix of Westminster students from different courses, academic years, campuses and backgrounds living across London who use it to meet others and advertise spare rooms. We continually receive positive feedback from students who have met in this way and we would definitely recommend joining and taking a look.

Sometimes, especially for first year students, finding people to live with is the main barrier. To help you with this the University also runs workshops to get people together, these sessions are usually in August and Early September and are publicised on the Housing Teams website. If you cannot make a session you can call them to discuss other options.

However it may be that you find your group It is important to meet everyone first and ensure that you get a good feel for them before you commit as this can save a lot of distress later on. You are likely to be signing legally binding agreements with them so do not be tempted to take this stage lightly.

### **Step 2 – Set a budget**

When you are in your group you should find out what everyone's maximum budget is and base your search on the lowest figure. This way you will avoid people dropping out and ensure that no one is placed under excessive financial pressure.

### **Step 3 – Look at areas**

Once you know how many of you there are and your budget you will be able to get an idea of the areas and standard of property that are affordable to the group.

London is a big place made up of more than 30 boroughs that can vary widely from densely urban to green and leafy. Research local amenities, the transport links and find out your route into class. Be realistic in your expectations and remember that Central London is very expensive. Bear in mind that there are more affordable areas further out that benefit from good transport links into the Centre. By moving further out you may find something cheaper, larger or of a better standard depending upon which of these factors is most important to you. The Transport For London (TFL) website is very useful when researching areas as you can check the tube map for travel links and plan journeys using post codes - [www.tfl.gov.uk](http://www.tfl.gov.uk).

#### **Step 4 – Look at what's available**

Possibly the best way to search for properties is online. There are a number of useful websites with search engines allowing you to define your budget and location. This method will enable you to clearly see what is available in the area you are interested in and give you an insight as to what you can expect to get for your budget. We have listed some of the most useful websites on our fact sheet which you can download.

If you are seeking to a room in an existing share our Facebook group, Sparerroom and Gumtree are possibly your best online options.

Another option for established groups is to visit your areas of choice and speak to the local letting agents. A benefit of this approach may be that you get to see new properties before they are listed on the agent's website. Please be careful when using a smaller agent and do not consider handing over any money at this stage.

#### **Step 5 – Set up viewings**

Once you have drawn up a shortlist of potential properties ring the landlord and ask if they are still available. The market moves very quickly and you should set up a viewing as quickly because landlords will often rent the property to the first group to visit. When you speak to the landlord double check that the information on the advert was correct to make sure you are not wasting your time.

During visits look at the location of the property and its transport links. You should also look out for signs of wear and tear in the property that could give a clue as to how seriously the landlord carries out maintenance. Always ask if the property has an up to date gas safety certificate and if it is registered as a House of Multiple Occupation (HMO). This should be the case if the property is over three stories high and has three or more people living in it. You can find out more here;

<https://www.gov.uk/private-renting/houses-in-multiple-occupation>

Try to attend a viewing in a group, or at least not on your own. If you have to be on your own it is best to go during daylight hours and to let someone know where you are. Do not commit to anything or sign a contract without having carefully read through the details and getting it checked if necessary.

If you are just viewing a spare room then do not be afraid to ask questions about the lifestyle and schedules of the other housemates. Try not to be put off if the viewing turns into an interview, as the existing housemates will want to know as much as possible about you before they invite you to move in.

#### **Step 6 – Contracts and Deposits**

Now you have a property that you are keen on it is vital to check the contracts very carefully. If you are renting a room in the landlord's own home the agreement is likely to be more informal, however if you are renting a whole house or flat the contract will be lengthy and legally binding. Ensure all members of the group have read it and understood what is being asked; if you need clarification please contact the Accommodation Office.

Make sure you are aware of when the rent is due and how much the deposit is. Any deposit for a whole house or flat should be protected in one of the tenancy deposit schemes which were set up by the Government to arbitrate in the case of disputes.

### **Step 7 – Get your Guarantor**

Most landlords want their tenants to have a guarantor. This is someone who is willing to sign a contract making them liable for the rent in the event that you run into arrears or move out unexpectedly. Providing that you pay your rent on time there should be no financial cost to this person, but they need to be aware that there is a financial responsibility.

Another thing you may have to do at this stage is to pay agency fees if you have used a letting agent. Most letting agents charge a fee for drawing up contract and in some cases for carrying out a reference check. There's no limit to what they can charge and prices vary; you are best ask this question when you first speak to them.

### **Step 8 – Do an inventory**

Once the contracts are signed and guarantors approved you will be able to move in. It is really important that you carry out an inventory and record the condition of the property when you moved in, you should also record all furniture and fittings. The landlord may pay someone to do this with you, but if you are doing it yourself you should take photos of any existing damage. Carry out an inventory means that you are less likely to have unfair charges against your deposit when you move out.

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