



STUDENTS  
ORGANISING FOR  
SUSTAINABILITY  
UNITED KINGDOM

# HOUSE HUNTING FOR A WARM HOME

In many university cities in the UK, house hunting season for the following academic year begins early, sometimes even in October the year prior. For many students, this is the first time they ever play an active role in house viewings. This guide provides advice on how to make sure you find out everything you need to know about the property and if it will be able to keep you warm before you sign.

## Before you view the house

### Consider the type of property

**Flats and terraced houses**, which share walls, ceilings and/or floors with others will be easier (and cheaper) to heat than detached ones. This is because flats/terraces can have other people heating their homes above, below and even next to them. This helps with heat retention, meaning it is less expensive to keep the home at the desired temperature.

It is worth remembering that **new builds** are typically better at retaining heat and are less draughty, and should therefore have lower heating bills than older homes, but you should also **check the insulation** of the property as this can have a significant effect on heat retention.

Another thing to think about is the **size of the property**. Smaller ones will be cheaper to heat - but having more housemates also means splitting bills between more of you, which can mean your share is smaller.

### Check the EPC - Energy Performance Certificate

The EPC provides information about the energy efficiency of a property, all properties being let must have a **minimum Energy Efficient Rating of 'E'** or above - the higher the Energy Efficient Rating, the lower your fuel bills are likely to be.

The EPC **must be provided** to prospective tenants free of charge. Alternatively, you can also find the EPC online here: <https://find-energy-certificate.digital.communities.gov.uk/>, and if you are in Scotland, here: <https://www.scottishepcregister.org.uk/>.



EPC includes estimated energy costs for the property which can be used to compare how expensive different properties will be to live in. It can also help identify what modern fixtures, fittings and systems the home has, e.g. central heating, insulation, double glazing - all of these are desirable for staying warm in the building.

## During the viewing

### Check for damp

Damp refers to the presence of moisture within a property. It can lead to an issue with mould in the property, damage health and belongings. Around a third of students report experiencing damp or mould and condensation in their current accommodation in the private rented sector.

Ideally, **avoid signing for a property with an existing damp problem** - if it is there during the viewing, it is unlikely that it will disappear by the time you move in.

#### Tell-tale signs of damp/mould:

- Musty smell
- 'Tide mark' wet mark rising from the floor/skirting board
- Blotchy damp patches or crumbly plaster on the walls
- Damp marks in corners of the ceiling
- Water droplets & sometimes larger pools of water on windows and windowsills
- Black, grey or green, sometimes 'fuzzy' spots on surfaces

**Condensation** can usually be managed with use, so do not write off a property just because you see some condensation. It may just mean that someone has just showered, or a room needs airing out.

For more information on managing damp and condensation, check out our '**Damp, condensation and mould**' guide.

### Check for draughts

Presence of draughts will mean you are likely to feel cold in this house, especially when outside temperatures drop. It also means the **heat will escape** from it quicker - potentially risking higher heating bills. Some draughts also cause humming noise which can be really irritating.

#### Checking for draughts:

- Visually inspect windows and doors
  - Outside: look for areas where the caulking has broken and revealed a gap next to the frame, or any signs of, e.g. bay window structure detaching itself from the wall.
  - Inside: check the sealing around windows and doors and frames for any gaps or breaks.
- If the frame is accessible, run your hand slowly along the perimeter of the door's/window's interior. If you feel a breeze, however small, it usually indicates a draught. Draughts aren't always from stand-alone gaps or breaks - windows may just be loosely sealed.

## Go into the cellar

This is not the most pleasant place to visit, but if the property has a cellar, it needs to be done - you do not want to sign for a house only to find a problematic cellar will keep causing you issues for the duration of the contract.

- Check that **energy meters** are accessible (they are often in the basement)
- **Look up** - can you see **insulation**? You want to see something similar to the photo on the cellar ceiling.
- **Use your senses** - can you see/smell **damp**? A damp cellar, especially when uninsulated, will mean the smell and cold permeating into the room above it.



## Check gas and electric

- Is there a valid **gas safety certificate**?
  - Landlords are legally required to renew their gas safety certificate every 12 months. Tenants must be given a copy of the certificate within 28 days of the gas safety check, and new tenants need to receive this at the start of the tenancy.
- Do the **hob and oven** work?
  - **What kind of hob** is it?
    - Remember that not all pots and pans work with ceramic electric and induction hobs.
    - Induction hobs are more efficient, use less power and remain cold until you place a pan on it, meaning it uses less energy than other types of electric hobs. It is also safer since there is no flame involved like in gas hobs.
    - If gas, would you need to use a lighter/matches, or does the ignition sparkle work? Consider this especially if you are not confident or able to safely light the ring yourself every time.
  - **What kind of oven** is it?
    - Electric ovens provide even, consistent cooking. They use an electric heating element that produces a drier heat than gas ovens. It is possible to turn an electric oven off before you are done and finish cooking in it with residual heat. A gas oven has to be on for the whole time
- Has the **wiring** been checked at least once within the last 5 years?
  - According to IET wiring regulations for rented houses and flats and HMOs, a routine check should be done every year, and a maximum interval between testing is either change of occupancy or every 5 years.
- What **appliances** are provided (e.g. kettle, toaster), and are those PAT tested?
  - Portable Appliance Testing (PAT) is the process of checking electrical appliances for safety. This is not a legal requirement for rented accommodation, but it is good practice to ensure the appliances provided by your landlord are not dangerous to use.

## Ask about the heating system

- Is it **gas or electric**?
  - Using electric for heating is more expensive.
- Can you set it on a **timer**, is the timer available for **more than one time period** in the day?
  - Sometimes it is only possible to set the timer on 1 automatic time period, which is not very helpful in shared households where people often have different schedules and need the heating coming on at various times during the day.
- Is there/Where is the **thermostat**?
- Are there **valves** on all radiators? Do they work?
  - These are important for being able to adjust heating levels in different rooms.

## Ask about insulation measures

A house that is well insulated will need less heating and will stay warm for longer.

- Do the windows have **double/triple glazing**?
- Is there **loft/roof/wall insulation**?
  - Look particularly for loft insulation - A LOT of heat can get lost that way, and if there is a loft bedroom, it would get very cold very quickly without insulation in winter.
- If you didn't see mineral wool on the cellar ceiling - is there **another type of insulation** in place for the room above it?
- If there is a separate **hot water tank** - is it insulated?
  - These days most properties with a gas connection are heated with gas fired combi boilers which provide hot water for radiators as well as instantaneous hot water for taps. Older systems might still have a separate tank for hot water for taps - if this is the case for the property you are viewing, make sure the tank is insulated to retain the heat well.

## Check the curtains

Drawing the curtains at dusk can reduce heat loss by around 15-17%. The figure is 13-14% for blinds. **Heavier curtains** are generally better at preventing heat exchange between the cold air around the window and the warm air in the rest of the room - in short, they are **better insulators**. The best insulating curtains come with a **lining** attached to the rear, which is designed to increase insulation as well as limit airflow and noise transfer.

## Signing for a house

### Get things down in writing

**Verbal agreements do not count.** If landlord/agent is promising repairs or improvements and you would be happy to sign the contract based on that - get them **in writing into your contract or as a contract supplement** that is **signed** by both parties, otherwise they have no obligation to get them done. This should also be done if e.g. you agree on specific dates to pay rent by.

## Bills included or excluded?

Think carefully about this - here are some things to consider about both arrangements:

Included	Excluded
One payment for rent and amenities that's the same every month - but be wary of an energy usage cap or a fair usage policy	A number of payments that need to be made every month/quarter, and the price can change
Generally more costly - you are paying for convenience	Generally cheaper
If you're not the one on the bill, you can't choose/change suppliers	You can switch suppliers as you please
	Can involve chasing housemates to pay their fair share

## Make sure everything is correct and included in your contract

- Landlord's name/address
- All dates and tenants' names
- Type of contract - joint or individual?
  - Joint contract means you are **all jointly and individually responsible** for the terms and conditions of the tenancy agreement. This means that one or all of you can be held responsible for the **whole** rent, not just 'your share', if someone does not pay their part of it. In practice this is not a common occurrence, but worth bearing in mind if you are signing a contract with people you do not know well.
  - An individual contract **only** obliges you to paying rent **for yourself**. If other people you share with don't pay their rent, this won't affect your tenancy.
- What deposit protection scheme your landlord/agency uses
  - They must place your deposit in a tenancy deposit protection (TDP) scheme must within 30 days of getting it.

**ALWAYS READ THE CONTRACT BEFORE SIGNING, and as soon as you move in, complete the inventory**