

Choosing safe accommodation

This leaflet gives guidance on choosing safe accommodation during your UK or overseas placement. The standard of safety and security in accommodation can vary greatly, so if you are going to be working away from home, it is important to start looking for the right accommodation early and take time to find out what is on offer. Making the right decision now will ensure you are happy about your accommodation during your stay.

Budgets can be tight, but don't be tempted to go for the cheapest accommodation available. There will be reasons why it is cheap. Maybe it's the high crime levels in the area or the landlord isn't maintaining the property. Spending less on rent now could cost you more in the longer term. In extreme cases it can put you at risk of serious harm or death.

The following tips aim to help you make the right decision. You may not be able to find a property that meets all of your needs, but you need to weigh up what is most important to you and consider how you will deal with risks that you can't avoid.

Fire, gas and electrical safety are very important. Fitting your own smoke and carbon monoxide detectors on landings or near boilers if they are not already available at the property are examples of how you can protect yourself.

General advice on finding accommodation

To start with ask any in-country contacts if they can help or advise on suitable accommodation. You may also be able to contact other students who either live in the country you are going to or who have had work placements there previously. Other good sources of information are country guides on the University's travel insurer's or Gov.UK websites (see further information below), travel guidebooks and online travel guides.

Find out what are the best neighbourhoods and whether there are local "no go" areas. The local police or your embassy / consulate may be able to help you with this. If you are looking for accommodation in the UK, type the postcode into the www.police.uk website to find out about local crime rates and contact information of local policing teams.

If there are landlord accreditation schemes or reputable agents, use them, as they will have carried out their own safety check; ask what checks are made and how frequently these are carried out. *Note that the University does not allow the use of AirBnB, because safety checks are not carried out on the accommodation listed.*

If possible view the accommodation before you pay any deposit and commit to staying there. Alternatively have a "plan B" just in case on arrival you find the accommodation is unsuitable. For example be prepared to book into a local bed and breakfast or hotel. Having an alternative arrangement planned will mean you won't feel under pressure to accept accommodation that is unsuitable.

When viewing accommodation try to take someone with you, or if that isn't possible, leave details of where you are going and when you expect to be back with a colleague. Try to view the accommodation by day and at night. Also check local travel arrangements: How will you get from your accommodation to your place of work / study / research? How close are you to local amenities? How far is it to walk to or from public transport or your car and is the route well lit?

What to look for when assessing the suitability of a property

Security

When you view or ask about the property, check what security arrangements are in place. If you plan to stay in a hotel or apartment block, is there 24 hour security with CCTV or a person on reception and are rooms fitted with dead bolts, chains and/or door viewers.

If staying in a house, does it have good quality door and window locks (or even a burglar alarm)? Door and window locks should not require a key to open them from the inside, for fire safety.

Ground floor accommodation is usually a greater security risk, however rooms or apartments located on higher floors may be a greater risk in a fire. If you have concerns about the standards of security or fire safety ask for a room or apartment on the 2nd to 7th floor.

Fire safety

Brick or concrete built buildings are the most fire safe. When looking around, check the following:

- Are there smoke alarms / detectors in rooms and along escape routes. Do they work? If necessary fit a battery powered unit yourself and test it regularly.
- Are internal doors, in good condition and shut properly?
- Are there fire extinguishers? If so have they been tested recently?
- Is there a fire blanket in the kitchen?
- Check that fire exits on escape route open in the direction of travel and go to a place of safety, i.e. not to a closed 'dead' end.
- Check that final exits can be opened quickly from the inside in an emergency (i.e. they are not key operated).
- Are escape routes being kept clear of rubbish or other obstacles?

In the UK upholstered furniture is made of fire resistant materials and will be labelled to say it is fire safe, but this may not be the case in some overseas countries. If you are not sure about the fire safety of upholstered furniture make sure that you keep naked flames (e.g. candles, cigarettes) well away from it.

Gas and electrical safety:

Poorly serviced, badly fitted or faulty gas appliances could put you at risk from fire, explosion or carbon monoxide poisoning. Carbon monoxide can kill quickly with no warning. Symptoms include tiredness, drowsiness, headache, nausea, pains in the chest and stomach pains.

If your source of heating or cooking is gas, check that it is regularly maintained in a safe condition. (NB: In the UK the landlord must provide an annual GasSafe certificate. See: [Gas safety](#))

Check whether there is adequate ventilation. For example look out for extractor fans in the kitchen and bathroom. Ask whether there is there a carbon monoxide detector alarm. If not consider fitting your own.

Poorly maintained or unsafe electrical systems and appliances cause fires and electric shock. So ask whether the electrical system has a regular safety check by a qualified electrician. In the UK the landlord may have a certificate from the National Council for Electrical Installation Contractors.

As you look around, check the sockets and electrical items. Are they in good working condition, without exposed inner wires or scorch marks?



Examples of unsafe electrical plugs, sockets and leads

Premises safety

Walk around the property and check for evidence that the property is being well maintained and that neighbouring properties are well kept. Is the property clean, with no sign of damp, condensation, vermin or pests? Are walls and floors in good condition? Also ask about the arrangements for arranging repairs and who is responsible for maintenance and costs.

Another potential area of risk is falls from height. Check the following:

- Are balconies sturdy, filled in (minimum 2 horizontal rails) and come to at least your waist height
- Does the bottom edge of open windows on upper floors come to at least the top of your thigh? If not, is there a barrier to prevent falls?
- Are large areas of glass made of safety glazing? Thinner glass will “ping” when tapped.

If you accept a property which doesn't meet the above take extra care.

Further information

Housing advice for students: There are some other useful pointers on the Students Union website at: <https://www.essexstudent.com/advice/housing> and at www.studentpad.co.uk/HousingGuide .

Overseas Visits: University health and safety standard: www.essex.ac.uk/health-safety/activities/overseas-travel.aspx This site includes information on how to access the University's travel insurer's website which gives country specific travel advice.

Gov.UK Travel advice: Information on country specific risks: www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice Also contact details of local embassies/consulates.