

Looking for a home in the private rented sector?

The private rented sector can provide you with anything you want, from a room in a shared house to a luxury home in an exclusive area. It all depends on what you want and how much you want to pay for it. Rental prices vary considerably from location to location within the town and this may restrict the areas in which you can rent.

Rented properties can be found advertised in the local news papers, advertised in shop windows and by word of mouth.

Whichever way you locate a property that you are interested in renting there are some things that you, as a prospective tenant need to be aware of.

Finding a home:

Stage 1

Property size and bedrooms:

The first question you must ask yourself is how many bedrooms do I need?

The property MUST be large enough to accommodate you (and your family). If you rent a property that is too small for your needs, do not expect help from the Council, indeed *you* may be guilty of an offence.

If children are born into the household, it is *your* responsibility to find new accommodation, if the property becomes overcrowded.

The minimum size of (flat or house/shared house) bedroom for 1 person to sleep in is 70 square feet (6.5 square metres) and for a couple, or 2 sharing 110 square feet (11 square metres). A room described as a box room, should be measured to ensure that it is big enough to be used.

Children under 1 do not count. Children between the age of 1 and 10 count as ½ persons, but are counted as a whole person on achieving 10. Generally no more than 2 children or adults should share a room unless it is for a short period, eg visiting family members.

Table 1 below gives a guide as to the number of bedrooms you should be considering.

Table 1

Number of people to be accommodated	Suggested type of property
1	One bedroom flat, studio flat, bed-sit, shared house.
2 (2 adults, or 1 Adult and 1 child under 10)	One bedroom flat, studio flat, bed-sit, shared house. (One double bedroom)
3 (2 adults and 1 child)	Two bedroom flat, 2 bedroom house. (One double bedroom, 1 single bedroom).
4 (2 adults and 2 children of opposite sexes, one of whom is over 10)	Four bedroom flat, 4 bedroom house. (1 double, two single bedrooms)
4 (2 adults and 2 children over 10 but of the same sex)	Two bedroom house or flat. (2 double bedrooms)

Location:

There are properties available for rent through out Bournemouth. If you have children of school age, you may wish to consider being near a school. You may also wish to think about whether there is somewhere that they can play safely, such as in your own garden or in a nearby park.

Obviously, if you want a quiet life, or have young children, don't set up home near a noisy pub, night club, in the town centre or near the airport.

If you have limited mobility you may wish to look for a home near to shops or doctors.

Stage 2

Looking at your new home:

You've decided on the size of property you need and the location you would like/can afford. The next steps are:

- Find a property that you like the sound of and go look at it from the outside BEFORE contacting the agent. Ask yourself is the outside clean and tidy, do you like the area? If you have physical disabilities is the area manageable for you?
- Look at the roof, are there any loose or missing slates/tiles up there? Are the gutters secure, if it is raining, are they leaking? Are the soffits and fascias in place and do they look sound?
- Look at the windows, if they are timber do they show any signs of being rotten?
- Look at the path up to the front door, are there any big holes that could trip you up, uneven or tall steps on the way?

The answers to these questions should help you to decide whether to continue and look at the inside. If you think the property could be suitable for you contact the landlord/agent and arrange an appointment now.

Stage 3

Safety first:

- Don't go to view a property by yourself, always take somebody else with you.
- Failing that make sure friends or family know where you are going and what sort of time you will be returning home. Make sure that your mobile phone is charged and turned on.
- Don't take large amounts of cash with you with the intention of paying your deposit there and then - always visit the agent/landlord's office to do that.
- Meet the agent or landlord outside the property.
- Let the landlord or agent enter the property and each room in turn first. Don't let them get between you and the room/exit door.

Inspect the property:

Start at the front of the property

- Check the state of the front and back doors, is the frame worn, rotten, broken. What type of lock is there? A 5 lever mortice lock is best. Yale locks offer poor security as do glazed doors.
- Do the floors move when you walk on them? This may indicate that there is a problem with the floor. Please note a *little* movement can be expected in the upper floors of old properties.
- Check the windows - make sure that you can open them fully and easily. If you have young children look at the height of the window cills, if they are below your waist height, your kids will find it easy to get up onto the cills and fall out. This is

particularly important at first floor level and above. Windows on the first floor and above should be restricted to prevent them opening wider than 100mm. BUT check that *at least one* window on the first floor can have the restrictors disabled so that the window can be used for escape in the event of a fire. Could you and your children easily climb out of it if you had to?

- Is there a gas central heating system? Ask when the boiler/gas appliances were last serviced and to see the gas safety certificate. (Your landlord/agent is required by law to produce one annually for each property that they let.) Are there instructions available for operating the heating system?
- Get the agent/landlord to turn the central heating system on. Feel each radiator - do they all get hot? Is there a radiator in each room? Do they have thermostatic radiator valves fitted? Is there a thermostat in the hall.
- If there is not a gas fired central heating system, there must be some other form of fixed heating in each room. This may be electric convector heaters with dedicated electricity outlets or gas warm air heaters, or economy 7 storage heaters. E7 storage heaters may require supplementing with a convector heater in the lounge.
- If the property is old, ask whether the property has been thermally insulated and when it was done.
- Turn on the hot and cold water taps in the kitchen and bathroom(s) listen for any strange noises. Flush the loo(s). Turn on extract fans in the kitchen and bathroom.
- Try the cooker (if fitted) to make sure it works.
- Turn on the lights in each room.
- Look under the sinks, there should be yellow and green (earth bonding) wires attached to the pipes. If you don't see any, go to the main fuse board and check there.
- Check that there are smoke detectors in the ground floor and first floor landings. Ask the landlord or agent to test them whilst you are there. Ask if they are battery or mains powered. If they are battery powered, it will be up to you to change them when necessary.
- If the kitchen and lounge open directly into the hallway, make sure that there are doors in the doorways and that they can be closed easily, have door handles and them make sure that they will stay closed by pushing them firmly without turning the handle. If the door opens, it won't hold back a fire.
- If there is double glazing check to make sure that there are trickle vents over the heads of the windows. These allow a continuous low-level air flow through the house/flat to prevent condensation and mould growth.
- Look for areas of walls that look cleaner than the others. They may have been repainted. Ask why - there may have been a problem with mould growth.
- Ask the agent if the previous occupants had pets. If they did, ask if the property has been treated to kill any fleas left behind.
- Use your nose - if the property smells musty, don't assume it is because it has been shut up and not ventilated for a while. Ask if there has been mould growth problem.
- If the property is being rented with furniture (furnished letting) check that the beds and upholstered furniture have their labels intact.
- When walking up the stairs, are they steep and if so, do they have a handrail? Are the treads firm beneath you? Does the guarding have big gaps? If there are, your kids could get their heads stuck. Can the guarding on the landing be climbed easily? Is it below your waist level? You could go over the top of it.

- Ask who is responsible for gas, electricity and council tax bills. If you are taking on a flat or house, it is normally your responsibility to pay them.
- Finally, is the house/flat clean? If the property is not clean ask the agent/landlord to clean it before you sign any contracts.

Energy Performance Certificates

From October 2008, landlords and agents are required to produce Energy Performance Certificates and must show these to you when you are considering taking on a rented property. The EPC will give a rating of the property similar to the energy ratings on cookers, fridges and freezers. The lower the rating the more the property will cost you to heat.

Stage 4

Now that you've found a place what happens next?

Generally, most reputable agents/landlords will ask you to sign a contract (lease) for a fixed period of time, although in some instances a verbal contract may be made.

A verbal contract is not a good idea, if your landlord or agent will not give you a written contract if you ask - walk away. Similarly, if your landlord or agent will not give you their name and address in a verbal or written contract - walk away.

At this stage, you may be able to negotiate on the amount of rent to be paid.

Deposit:

Most landlords or agents will insist on a financial deposit and may ask that another person acts as your guarantor. The deposit will secure the property for you. If at the end of the contract there is damage to the property, the landlord/agent will use part or all of it to carry out repairs/clean/re-decorate.

Deposits vary between 1months to a couple of months rent or equivalent.

Always get a receipt for your deposit and keep it safe. This is the only proof that you will have that you paid it.

Deposit Security:

Your landlord or agent must by law lodge your deposit with a statutory agency. The landlord or agent must notify you within 14 days which scheme they have lodged your money with, also giving the name, address, telephone number and e-mail address of that scheme. If at the end of your contract, there is a dispute, the scheme organiser will act as arbitrator and agree to return all or part of your deposit.

Don't have a deposit and need one?

Bournemouth Churches Housing Association runs a tenancy deposit scheme. There are strict eligibility criteria, so you may not qualify.

Their address is:

St Swithun's House
21 Christchurch Road
Bournemouth.

Telephone Number (01202) 451500.

Housing Benefit:

If you are on a low income or unemployed, you may be eligible for help with your housing costs. Please note that housing benefit will only pay a portion of your rent and you are still bound by your contract to continue to pay the agreed rent (top up).

To find out whether you are eligible to received Housing Benefit call Housing & Council Tax Benefits on 01202 451592 or e-mail benefits@bournemouth.gov.uk.

Stage 5

Before moving in:

Before you move into the premises, ask the agent to accompany you on an inventory for the house. This will list the condition of the house, furniture and fittings. If they won't do that, make your own inventory of the house and take photographs, print and date them. Send, or better still, give a copy of your inventory to the landlord or agent. Agree what works will be done, by whom and by when.

Stage 6

During the tenancy:

Your contract will give some details about your rights as a tenant and your obligations. As you are the person living in the premises, you are best placed to notice any disrepair occurring in the place.

When you do notice it, it is *your* responsibility to let your landlord know that there is a problem and give them a chance to put it right.

In all cases we will expect you first to write them a letter detailing the problems, keep a copy and send the original by recorded delivery to your landlord or agent. Give them a reasonable period to do the works.

If this does not work, please contact the Healthy Homes Team on 01202 451083, 451309 or e-mail them on healthyhomes@bournemouth.gov.uk.

Should I stop paying my rent until the repairs are done?

NO! You have signed a contract to pay money to your agent/landlord for the accommodation. If you do not pay your rent, you are acting illegally and remember "two wrongs do not make a right."

What can the Council do?

We will arrange an inspection of the premises under the Housing Act 2004 and the Housing Health and Safety Hazard Rating System. This will identify the most serious hazards to you or your family and we will then follow these through with formal or informal action as appropriate. Please note we may not be able to take action if the hazard is not serious enough.

I'm fed up because my landlord won't do repairs - can I leave before the end of my contract?

Of course you can - BUT REMEMBER YOU HAVE SIGNED A CONTRACT AND YOU ARE LEGALLY OBLIGED TO KEEP ON PAYING THE RENT UNTIL THE CONTRACT EXPIRES, NO MATTER HOW LONG YOU HAVE LEFT AND YOU WILL PROBABLY LOSE YOUR DEPOSIT. In some case the landlord will agree to let you out of the contract early.

Stage 7

Ending the contract:

Your landlord can end the contract by giving you 2 months formal notice before the end of the contract. You will normally be expected to leave the premises at that stage. If you do not move out the landlord/agent will normally take you to court and have you evicted.

If he does not take any further action and continues to accept rent from you the courts would treat this as accepting that another agreement has been entered into.

My contract is due to expire and I want to move on?

Simple, give 1 months notice before the contract expires.

Getting my deposit back?

Before you leave the premises, make sure that you clean it thoroughly from top to bottom and put right any damage that you and your kids may have done, then ask your agent/landlord to inspect the premises with you to agree that there is nothing further you need to do. Get them to confirm this by signing your copy of the inventory to that effect. Your deposit should then be returned to you within 14 days.