



FRAUD Warning: Students advised not to pay for accommodation up front.

The Metropolitan Police has issued a warning to students at university and others seeking to let property in London, about the dangers of sending money up front in response to adverts for property to let. This advice has been endorsed by the National Union of Students.

Research by the 'Operation Sterling' Prevention Team, working in partnership with on-line advertising companies, shows that a significant number of people are falling victim to fraud after responding to advertisements for rooms, flats and houses to let.

The adverts may be for short or long-term rentals and may contain a series of photographs copied from other adverts. The fraudulent adverts most often appear on free advertising web sites as there is no transaction between the advertiser and web site. Paid for advertising is safer, as the payment can be traced, but many adverts are placed using compromised card details. Most of the web sites only operate as a billboard, and cannot be expected to check in detail the advertiser, premises or product.

It is recommended that established letting agents are used and in the case of students, to use landlords appearing in the list supplied by the university or student's union. If you use a private landlord, thoroughly check the premises in person and that the person you are dealing with has the right to let the premises out. It is difficult to establish whether the person advertising a property has the right to do so, especially with private lettings.

Making a 'holding deposit' or paying rent without visiting a property is giving the fraudster easy pickings. Prior to placing even a small 'holding deposit', visit the premises and satisfy yourself that the premises exist and that the person letting it out has the right to do so.

Best Practice:

- Try to use landlords and agencies that that are approved by the Universities.
- See the flat, house or room before you part with money and ensure the landlord has the right to let it out.
- Don't send money via a money transfer agent.
- Don't be tricked into sending money via a money transfer agent to friends or relatives as proof of funds. This money can be intercepted.
- Don't feel under pressure to make a decision.
- If you feel uneasy with the transaction walk away.

The adverts will be convincing, but the method of contact preferred by the fraudster is by email. Mobile numbers, and non-geographic business numbers beginning 070 are often used as the only means of talking to an advertiser. 070 numbers should be treated with suspicion unless they are provided by the web site as a secure means of contact. Check that landline numbers can be used to speak to the seller, as these often are fax numbers that fraudsters find on the internet.

Use the internet search engines to research the flat – does the address exist, are there multiple hits on the letting agency, and where do the contact numbers come back to? Forums and other web sites often provide details of known fraudulent adverts or suspicious activity.

Trust your instincts – something that seems too good to be true usually is and don't respond to something that gives you doubts even if you are tempted to take a risk. Bogus adverts often lead to an elaborate story or include mistakes in the text and language. Never be afraid to get a second opinion from a friend – they are often more objective and less emotionally involved.

The fraud usually takes place when people are encouraged to make payments in advance for rent or to make holding deposits prior to arrival at the property. Students and potential customers are usually asked for references, in order to show a landlord that they are responsible and reliable tenants. These references, may be from employers and previous landlords or arrange parents as guarantors, or even show (not give) ID or proof of ID (passport, driving license, wage slip) when they go to look around a property. Identity Documents should never be scanned then sent over the Internet or copies made in advance of agreeing the contract.

Payments should not be made via money transfer companies such as Western Union and Moneygram, their advice is clear - only use money transfer to send money to people that you know and trust. Never respond to a 'Proof of Funds' scam where you are requested to 'send money to a friend' and then send the details of the transaction to the 'seller' to show they have sufficient money to pay a deposit.

The safest way is to make a payment by credit card in person at a letting agents office. A formal contract should be signed before any money changes hands.

Where a deposit is taken other than a 'holding deposit' the money must be paid into a deposit scheme approved by the Department for Communities and Local Government DCLG. These schemes provide protection for tenants' deposits. Further information about the scheme and tenant's rights is available from the Student's Union and also can be found on the DCLG web site.

Links to Web Sites:

Metropolitan Police 'Fraud Alert' web pages. www.met.police.uk/fraudalert

National Union of Students. www.nus.org.uk

Department for Communities and Local Government Tenancy Deposit Protection Scheme.
www.communities.gov.uk/housing/rentingandletting/privaterenting/tenancydepositprotection