

# Making a Home in the Private Rented Sector

Practical Advice for Landlords and Letting Agents





## About the authors

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## Accessibility

To request a large print version of this guide, please contact the corresponding author Dr McKee.

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# Introduction

This good practice leaflet offers practical guidance for what you as landlords and letting agents can do to help your tenant make their rented house a 'home'.

## When is a house a 'home'?

Everyone's home is different, but there are some basic things that we all need when we're trying to make the place we live feel like home. It needs to be comfortable, safe and secure, not just four walls and a roof. And to feel at home, we need to have a sense of autonomy and a degree of control over the property.

## Why is having a 'home' important?

Home is a place to relax away from the stresses of everyday life – not having a safe, secure home damages health and wellbeing. Home is also a secure base from which to venture out into the world, so feeling at home supports tenants' ability to stay in employment and manage their lives more broadly. And where tenants feel at home, they are more likely to look after the property and stay for longer, reducing your costs and maintaining your income stream. So, it's good for business as well as for tenant wellbeing.

Our research makes seven key recommendations for you to consider. These are:

1. Invest in property quality, adaptations and energy efficiency
2. Do repairs fast and well
3. Don't jump to conclusions when selecting new tenants
4. Think about renting to families and tenants with pets
5. Negotiate with tenants about personalising the property
6. Be respectful and supportive
7. Offer longer tenancies with stable rents where possible



# Invest in property quality, adaptations and energy efficiency

You wouldn't want to live in a poorly maintained property and nor do your tenants. Property condition has real impacts on tenants' health and wellbeing. And where tenants don't feel comfortable with the condition of the property, they're less likely to take care of it and more likely to move on. So, here's what you can do:

- Make sure that your property is in good condition before tenants move in. Putting the money in at the start will help them settle and stay long term.
- Ask your tenants regularly whether there are any problems with the property.
- Be open to adaptations if your tenants need them. There are far more older tenants renting privately these days, so accessibility can be an asset for your property.
- Invest in insulation, draught-proofing and efficient heating. Tenants might not notice it on day one, but they're far more likely to move on if they're shivering when winter arrives. And we all need to do our bit for the climate anyway.

## Do repairs fast and well

Getting repairs done can be a real headache, but it's even worse for tenants if they have to live with broken appliances, unreliable heating, mould on the walls or other problems for a long time.

Again, where tenants feel like you're not responding to maintenance issues, or repairs aren't done properly, they're less likely to look after the place and more likely to move on. They may also stop reporting problems, so you can end up with a bigger mess to sort out. You can't fix everything instantly, but here's what you can do:

- Respond positively. When tenants report a repair, they want to feel heard, even if it will take a while to fix.
- Sort out repairs as quickly as you can. If it's going to take a while, keep your tenants up to date.
- Always let your tenants know when access to the property will be required, and communicate as clearly as you can about any likely disruption from repairs.
- Make sure repairs are done properly – poorly done repairs are often a false economy and will only lead to more calls from your tenants.
- Try to get repairs done even if a tenant is due to move out soon.



## Don't jump to conclusions when selecting new tenants



Some people find it difficult to get a tenancy because they're seen as high risk for different reasons.

For example, you might be worried about taking tenants on benefits because it may take a while for rent to come through. Or you might be wary about refugees and migrants because of the right to rent regulations (in England). Or you might avoid younger tenants because you think they won't look after the property.

Of course, you need to look after your investment and your property, but renting to people who find it hard to get a tenancy can be a good business decision.

If you offer people a home when others are excluding them, they're more likely to respect you and the property, and to stay long term.

These are the kind of things you could do without increasing your own risk:

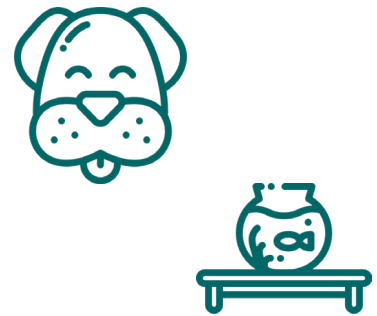
- Get up to date about legal requirements. Checking immigration/residency status is now a requirement in some parts of the UK, but there is guidance to help you.
- If you can afford it, be patient with the benefits system for new tenants – it might take a few weeks, but you'll get your money eventually.
- If your existing tenants fall on hard times, you could signpost them to support services - e.g. welfare and debt advice or the Citizens Advice Bureau. This will help them to sort out their financial situation and keep paying you rent.
- Try to avoid making assumptions about tenants based on age, income or other characteristics. For example, don't assume that young people or families with kids are going to cause more wear and tear on the property – it's OK to do regular inspections, but not to intrude on their lives.

## Think about renting to families and tenants with pets

There are more and more families renting privately, as well as households with pets. Parents need to be able to make a family home wherever they are living and many pet owners can only feel at home with their dog or cat (or whatever!).

Families and pet owners tend to stay longer, because they don't want the disruption of moving, so they can offer a really stable long-term income. Here's what you can do:

- Avoid a blanket ban on children or pets
- Find out about the family or the pet before you make a decision. For example, some landlords have found it very helpful to meet pets before deciding whether to let their property.



## Negotiate with tenants about personalising the property



Some tenants feel settled as soon as they've put their clothes in the wardrobe, but others find it hard to feel at home if they can't change the look of the place.

Tenants who are allowed to redecorate or make other changes to a property have better wellbeing and are more likely to stay for longer.

And it can save you money too – why pay for redecoration if you can let your tenants do it? It's all about being flexible within reasonable boundaries:

- It's fair enough to say that tenants can't redecorate as soon as they move in, but if they want to do it later, why not let them? So long as you can come to an agreement about colours and standards, it will help them feel at home as well as saving you money.
- Talk to tenants regularly to find out if there's anything they would like to change. Again, you don't have to cater to their every whim, but negotiation can go a long way in helping tenants feel like they have some control over where they live.

## Be respectful and supportive

Good communication and engagement with tenants throughout the tenancy is absolutely crucial.

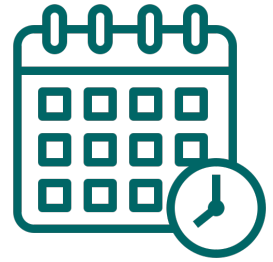
If you can build a good relationship with your tenants, they will feel more at home and it will also help to resolve lots of other issues.



You don't have to be best friends with your tenants, but being respectful and offering help where you can will go a long way:

- Provide a welcome pack for new tenants, including things like:
  - Instructions for all of the appliances and the heating system
  - Information about the local area – e.g. shops, public transport, local takeaways
  - Information about local services – e.g. GPs, Citizens Advice Bureau
  - Contact information for you, including the best way to contact you and how quickly you can be expected to respond
- Make sure that your tenants know what's their responsibility and what they can ask you to do. It's worth explaining this because not everyone reads their tenancy agreement as carefully as they should.
- Be sensitive about inspections. It's your property, but it's their home, so be aware that it's always going to feel a bit intrusive.
- Offer support to tenants who may be experiencing financial problems – be flexible about repayment of arrears where you can and signpost tenants to support where they need it.

# Offer longer tenancies with stable rents where possible



Tenants find it much easier to feel at home when they're not worried about the length of their tenancy or about possible rent rises.

In Scotland the Private Residential Tenancy gives extra security, but it doesn't fix every concern for tenants, and the rules are different elsewhere in the UK.

Bearing in mind the legal framework, you can do a few things to help tenants to make a home in their tenancy:

- Offer long term or open-ended tenancies to give your tenants a greater sense of security.
- Even if your tenants have an open-ended tenancy, they may still worry about how long they can stay. Talk to them as early as possible if you think you may need to end the tenancy.
- Take your tenants' financial circumstances into account when you are thinking about increasing their rent – putting rents up could mean that they have to move on, which may cost you more than you would have gained from the rent rise.
- Talk to your tenants well in advance about any planned rent rises, so that they can plan ahead too. And remember that things may be difficult financially for your tenants given the economic impacts of the pandemic.