

Protect yourself against these common rental scams

Today's rental market is a competitive place, so when you find the perfect spot it can be tempting to just sign on the dotted line and hope for the best.

Sadly, there are more and more scammers who are taking advantage of this opportunity to dupe unsuspecting applicants out of their hard-earned cash.

David Jacobs, Gauteng Regional Manager for the Rawson Property Group, shares some of the more common rental scams and explains how best to protect yourself against them.

The Branded Faker

The scam:

You arrive at a rental property and are handed an application on a pristine letterhead from a well-known and reputable agency. The place looks perfect, but you're told that there's a lot of interest so you need to be quick. Convinced, you sign the lease and transfer your deposit without hesitation. When moving day arrives, however, your "agent" has mysteriously disappeared leaving you with nowhere to stay and little hope of recovering your deposit."

The solution:

"Using a letting agent from a branded agency is a good choice from a safety perspective," says Jacobs, "but you need to confirm that they really are who they say they are before you take them at face value. Scammers are forging documents on branded letterheads to take advantage of prospective tenants, so documentation is no longer reliable proof of a legitimate mandate."

To avoid getting caught out, Jacobs urges applicants to double check their agent's credentials before signing anything. This is best done by visiting the brand's central website to find the branch or franchise's details and give them a call to confirm the agent's accreditation."

"Don't call the number provided by the agent in question, as this could be fake," says Jacobs. "Always go directly to the central brand and get the necessary contact details from there."

The Development Dodge

The scam:

You arrive at a new development to view one of the newly completed units, but your agent has accidentally misplaced the keys. That's okay - you can view the place through the windows, or even visit a similar, but not-yet-finished unit to decide whether you want to apply for the lease.

You like what you can see, so you transfer your deposit and start packing your stuff for move-in day. When that day comes, you arrive at the apartment only to discover that it was never available, and your "agent" has absconded with your deposit and your first month's rent."

The solution:

"This particular scam is almost exclusive to new developments," says Jacobs, "so it's a good idea to be extra cautious in this kind of situation. Try not to rent a property that you haven't seen in person, and always double check your agent's credentials before transferring any money. This is easier to do if they're part of a big brand, but can also be done via the EAAB."

The (un)Happy Holiday

The scam:

You browse online media and find a beautiful holiday property for short-term rental. You get in touch with the listing agent and pay your deposit. When you arrive at your destination, kids in tow and sunscreen in hand, you discover eight or nine other families have also booked the same property, and the letting agent is nowhere to be found.

The solution:

"Holiday rental scams can be harder to spot," says Jacobs, "because it's usually impossible to view the property in person, or meet the landlord or agent face to face. Because of this, it's doubly important to do your homework before you hand over any cash. Do some Googling, find some reviews if possible, and always confirm all details for the property, agent and/or landlord."

The Disappearing Deposit***The scam:***

You find a great rental property and sign a private lease directly with the landlord. You pay your deposit and move in - everything is hunky-dory. Unbeknownst to you, your landlord has taken your deposit and spent it. When you decide to move out, they don't have the money to refund you.

The solution:

"This situation is most easily avoided by using a letting agent registered with the EAAB," says Jacobs. "Doing so not only ensures your agent is aware of their legal obligations, but also provides recompense if they fail to fulfil their responsibilities."

If you absolutely have to go the private lease route, Jacobs recommends asking your landlord for ongoing proof that your deposit remains in an interest-bearing account throughout the lease period.

"You are completely within your rights to ask for regular bank statements to this effect," he says. "If your landlord refuses to provide them, chances are something dodgy is going on."

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