

A landlord's guide to fraud prevention

Fraud is an ever-present risk for landlords, and its impact, both financial and legal, can be devastating. From criminals impersonating property owners to fake letting agents and tenants using forged identities, the threats are varied and are becoming increasingly sophisticated.

Created in collaboration with Suzanne Smith, this guide breaks down the three most common types of fraud landlords face and the practical steps you can take to mitigate each risk.

1. Property fraud

The risk

Property fraud is nicknamed “property hijacking”, and occurs when a tenant, or someone collaborating with a tenant, impersonates the registered owner, before “selling” or mortgaging the property.

HM Land Registry prevented fraudulent applications against more than 300 properties worth over £194 million between 2020 and 2025.

Unincorporated landlords are at risk if the address of the registered owner on the HM Land Registry record is the address of the property itself, and not the home address of the landlord. This may happen with accidental landlords who previously lived there, or if the solicitors were lax and did not use the home address of the landlord.

Landlords with mortgages are generally protected because the lender will put a restriction on the title that stops a sale without their consent. However, if a property does not have a mortgage, a restriction will not be in place unless the owner has arranged it themselves.

How to reduce the risk

- **Update the "address for service" on your registered title.** Ensure that the address of the registered proprietor in the Register of Title has either your home address, or the registered office if the owner is a limited company. If not, it is easy to change it by completing and returning Form **COG1** to HM Land Registry. There is no charge and you do not need to use a solicitor. Update the address if you move or change the address of the registered office.
- **Sign up for property alerts.** Sign up to HM Land Registry's free **Property Alert Service**, which allows you to monitor up to 10 properties. The service sends an email alert if anyone applies to change the register, for instance, to register a new mortgage.
- **Apply for a restriction on the title.** This will prevent a sale from being registered unless a conveyancer certifies they have checked the identity of the person signing the deed. To do this, email a completed **Form RQ** if the property is in your own name, or **Form RQ (Co)** if a limited company owns the property, to HM Land Registry. The service is free where the registered proprietor does not live at the property. Note that you will not need to do this if your property has a mortgage.

2. Rental fraud

The risk

According to the [Home Office](#), losses from rental fraud in 2024 amounted to nearly £9 million, from around 5,000 reported cases.

Rental fraud involves someone pretending to be a legitimate letting agent or landlord and taking deposits and upfront payments of rent from people wanting to rent the property, only to vanish with the money.

Sometimes scammers lift photos and descriptions from legitimate websites and repost them on free-to-list websites at a lower price. A professional looking website can make the fraudsters appear genuine.

Others clone the website of a legitimate letting agent, copying logos, staff photos, and property listings, using a subtly different domain name.

Usually the fraudsters target prospective tenants, but landlords can be at risk if they engage a fake or criminal letting agent, hand over the keys, and then the agent does not protect the deposit or forward the rent to the landlord.

How to reduce the risk

Here are different ways to check whether a letting agent is legitimate:

- **Use Google.** Google the name of the agent and the address to see if there are any red flags. Does the website domain name match that on Google?
- **Check the company details.** The website should have the company name and number of the agent. It is free and straightforward to research the company and the directors on the [Companies House website](#).
- **What is the email and phone number?** Legitimate letting agents have a corporate email address and a landline. If the contact details on the website show a Gmail email address or a mobile number as the sole contact details, it is a red flag.
- **Does the agent's website look legitimate?** It is very easy to create a convincingly professional website. Scammers scrape listings from other websites to look legitimate or use generic interior shots that may not fit with the building. Before signing up with an agent, spot check their listings.

- **Visit their offices.** Be suspicious if a letting agent does not want to meet you at their office, and make a point of visiting.
- **Redress schemes.** It is a legal requirement for letting agents to register with one of two redress schemes. You can check to see if they are registered here: [The Property Ombudsman](#) or [Property Redress](#).
- **Client Money Protection (CMP) scheme.** The agent is legally obliged to register with a CMP scheme, and show the scheme's logo on their website. There should be a hyperlink to their CMP certificate. Click through to it to see if it has expired, and cross-check it with the scheme.
- **Fees.** It is a legal obligation for letting agents to publish their fees on their website. If the fees are not stated, this is a red flag. It is also a potential red flag if the fees seem suspiciously low.
- **Prove your own legitimacy:** Reputable high street and online letting agents will ask you to prove you own the property. Be prepared to do this.



3. Tenant fraud

The risk

Whereas landlords often worry that tenants may fall into rent arrears or will not look after the property well, a greater threat comes from professional fraudsters. They use fake identities or “front couples” to rent properties for criminal activities such as illegal HMOs, people trafficking or cannabis farming.

Alternatively, tenant fraud may involve an individual who hides a bad credit and renting history with fake documents and references.

The sophistication of these operations is increasing. High-quality fake bank statements and payslips can be bought online, or mocked up using Photoshop, and references from landlords and employers can be provided by a friend.

How to reduce the risk

Here are some tips on how to verify whether the prospective tenant is genuine:

— **Invest in a professional reference with Open Banking.** Do not rely on PDF bank statements as they are too easy to fake. Instead, pay for a reputable referencing service that uses Open Banking. This takes a read-only snapshot of tenant's transactions in their bank account, which verifies income and the payment of rent. The tenant cannot manipulate the data as it comes directly from the bank. If a tenant refuses Open Banking "for privacy

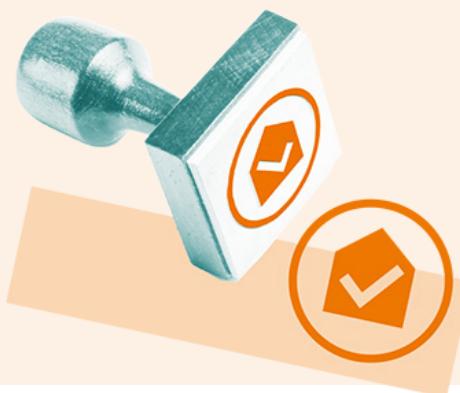
reasons," be cautious. While some genuine tenants have qualms about Open Banking, professional fraudsters will **always** refuse Open Banking.

- **Landlord references.** A reference from a current landlord is often of little value as they might say anything to get rid of a bad tenant. The previous landlord, on the other hand, is a much better source of truth. However, you must verify that the referee is actually a landlord, and not just a friend.
- **Check them out.** Google your short list of applicants, and search for them on social media. Their digital footprint, or lack of one, can be very telling.
- **Meet them.** Whether or not you use agents, insist on meeting the applicants in person before you agree to rent the property to them. It is harder to sustain a lie when looking someone in the eye.
- **Do not be rushed.** Be wary of tenants who are desperate to move in immediately without viewing, or who offer six months' rent in cash (while they still can) to bypass checks. Never skip on referencing.
- **Do an early “maintenance visit”.** I let prospective tenants know I will visit two weeks after they move in to check if any maintenance needs doing. Legitimate tenants are happy, as it shows I am serious about keeping the property in good condition. It also deters potential fraudsters.

Final thoughts

Fraud relies on victims assuming that the perpetrators are legitimate. So, it is important for landlords to be aware of the types of fraud they face and set up systems to highlight potential fraud. **Verify before you trust.**

The most effective defence against fraud is professionalism, and professionalism is not just for large corporate landlords. It is the approach of prioritising verification and process over hope, whether you have one property or a hundred.



Suzanne Smith is the founder of The Independent Landlord, a trusted resource for landlords navigating the complexities of property letting. Suzanne covers more detail on choosing good tenants in her blog post [How to choose good tenants](#). To explore more of Suzanne's content or sign up to her free weekly newsletter, visit her [website here](#).

Please note: The insights in this guide reflect Suzanne Smith's personal experience as a landlord and founder of The Independent Landlord. They are provided for general information purposes only and should not be interpreted as legal or financial advice.