



Online Rental Scams

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Due to an increase in enquiries from Agents seeking advice on combating rental scams, Consumer Protection provides the following information.

The Department is aware of accommodation scams where scammers have hijacked real estate sales/rental advertisements and placed them on legitimate websites such as Gumtree.com.au and Flatmates.com for malicious purposes.

Consumer Protection advises all tenants to be wary of any landlord offering a property for rent when claiming to be travelling or living overseas. Scammers will often ask prospective tenants to forward rent and bond payments overseas by services such as Western Union. The Department strongly advises against doing so, as these transfers are difficult to trace and cannot be retrieved once scammers collect them. While it is less likely, scammers may instead request a bank transfer if the consumer is hesitant to transfer funds.

Scammers target classifieds and real estate websites by posting copies of genuine sales or rental listings often created by legitimate agencies. The scammers then place the adverts on 'free' listing websites and substitute an agency's contact details with their own. It is common for them to provide suspect passports and fraudulent title deeds to add credibility to their claims. Often the scammers will come up with various excuses as to why the premises cannot be visited prior to payment of deposit, bond or rent.

The Department recommends tenants deal with prospective landlords or licensed real estate agents **in person**. If this is not possible, tenants should be wary where email exchanges are via free webmail accounts, and/or visiting the premises is not possible and/or payments are requested upfront.

Agents should place **watermarks** over the pictures they place online, as this limits the ability of scammers to republish these pictures on different forums. Agents and owners may also wish to make periodic internet searches for the address of their listed properties to ensure they are not being used to fraudulently obtain money from prospective tenants or purchasers.

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If you discover a property has been unlawfully placed onto a classifieds website, you should report the advert immediately to the hosting website to have it removed. Sites such as Gumtree.com.au provide a 'report this ad' button on each advert.

Scammers commonly use free webmail accounts such as Gmail, Hotmail and Yahoo as these are easy to open and difficult to trace. Consumers can forward copies of the attempted fraud emails to the abuse reporting email of the provider (eg abuse@gmail.com). The service can then cancel or suspend the account to stop them being used to defraud others.

The methodologies used in these scams, such as false identities, wire transfers and email accounts, make it difficult for local authorities to trace offenders internationally. These techniques also make it difficult to refer the matter internationally for further investigation. However, an investigation maybe carried out if the offender can be traced to a location within Australia.

The Department offers the following warning and advice to consumers or prospective tenants:
[www.scamnet.wa.gov.au/scamnet/Types Of Scams-Buying selling and online sales scams-Rental and share accommodation scam.htm](http://www.scamnet.wa.gov.au/scamnet/Types%20Of%20Scams-Buying%20selling%20and%20online%20sales%20scams-Rental%20and%20share%20accommodation%20scam.htm)

Agents should advise clients who have queries, or have suffered a monetary loss, to contact the General Advice Line on 1300 30 40 54 or visit the WA ScamNet website at www.scamnet.wa.gov.au

Agents with queries about rental scams can contact ScamNet Research Officer Dale Turberville on 08 9282 0639.