Zoology Early Careers Research Network Advice for new starters 2017

Coming to Oxford as an early career researcher can be an exciting and daunting experience. Here’s a list of key tips that the Zoology Early Careers Research Network (ECRN) have pulled together from our collective experience to help you with your transition. We have provided lots of general tips, as well as tips specifically for international new starters.

Please connect with the Zoology ECRN on Facebook, and you can find out more about our network on the Zoology website.

Once you’ve moved to Oxford and have any additional tips you’d like to share for new starters, please feel free to contact us!

General tips

1) **Do your research before the big move.** The better prepared you are, the easier your transition will be. If you have friends or families already living in the UK, it will be useful to contact them for advice. The University of Oxford advice for newcomers and international staff welcome page will also be useful resources. We also recommend searching for relevant Facebook groups to join, like the Zoology ECRN!

2) **Accommodation.** The University website is a good place to start looking for accommodation. Here’s a link to the accommodation website advertising private housing options available to staff and students. Daily info is another good place to check. You can also find rooms for rent in EasyRoommate, SpareRoom, and GumTree.

Here are a few things to consider when sorting out your accommodation:

- **Timeline:** Most long-term accommodation in Oxford will be advertised 4-6 weeks before it is available, and good places tend to go fast. So it may be worth arranging short-term accommodation ahead of your arrival (or for a visit if possible), and looking for a long-term rental after you arrive. Rental contracts are normally for 12 months (occasionally 6 months) to start, after which you may sign a new fixed-term contract or may switch to a month-to-month rolling contract. If you want to leave ahead of your fixed term, you will be responsible for finding a replacement and may have to pay a fee (especially if you are with a letting agency) for the tenant change.

- **Letting agencies vs. private landlords:** There are many professional letting companies in Oxford who manage a large number of properties. Registering with one of these agents is an easy way to get a list of properties meeting your criteria and get viewings of many properties in a day, if you are in a rush. In addition to their own websites, these agents tend to advertise their properties on websites such as Rightmove and Zoopla, where you can search listings from multiple agents in one place according to your search criteria. If you go through a letting agency, make sure you get a full list of fees they charge (these are not included in the advertised monthly rent!) and calculate these into your budget. The other option is to deal directly with a private landlord advertising their property independently. These tend to be advertised on websites such as Gumtree and Dailyinfo. Private landlords likely will not have additional fees, but may also have less standardized procedures and expectations than an agency.
• **Total costs:** In addition to monthly rent (which is expensive in Oxford!), you will have to pay Council Tax, which can be roughly £1000-2000 per year, depending on the area in which you live and other factors (e.g. number of occupants at the property). Usually Council Tax is not included in the monthly rent, but sometimes it is, so keep this in mind when comparing properties according to your budget (ask what band of council tax the property is and check this on the council website as it does change. This is also where you can find council tax costs). If you live alone you can get a 25% discount on your council tax, but it’s not automatic and you have to apply for it online. Finally, consider utility costs (gas, electricity, water, optionally phone/Internet) – ask your future housemates or the previous tenants for an estimate.

• **Furnished vs. unfurnished:** Both rental property types are common in Oxford. If you are coming from overseas without furniture, or if you prefer to have your own furniture, this is definitely something to look out for in property listings.

• **Your rights as a renter:** The university has a useful checklist for rental properties and the Citizens Advice Bureau can advise you on your rights as a renter, among other tips.

• **Short-term accommodation options:** Oxford Student Pad; Commonwealth House; Rewley House; North Oxford; Overseas Centre; Short Let Space; Abodes of Oxford; Midsomer Cottage; Riverside Rental; Mile View; Oxford EcoFlat; Youth Hostel; Venue masters; Oxford Rooms; AirBnB

3) **Travelling around Oxford.** There are various ways to get around Oxford:

• **Bike:** Cycling is an eco- and environmentally friendly way to travel, and can get you around Oxford far quicker than walking, by bus or car (buy lights as the police do regular checks at commonly used routes around the city. The police also recommend cyclists wear bike helmets). You can find second hand bikes on Gumtree and Daily Info websites, as well as in the many bike shops around Oxford. The University of Oxford offers staff an interest-free loan for the purchase of a bicycle and associated safety equipment.

• **Bus and train:** The Oxford Bus Company and Stagecoach Company offer good deals for frequent travellers (make sure you show your University card for a discount on some tickets). The Oxford Bus Company runs The Airline buses to Heathrow and Gatwick airports. The Oxford Tube bus (runs 24 7) is a popular way to get from Oxford to London (Victoria – final destination). To reach other UK destinations, you can travel by the National Express bus (from the main bus station at Gloucester Green) or train (from the train station just west of the city centre. Chiltern Railways offers the cheapest rail link between Oxford and London (but you’ll be travelling in an environmentally unfriendly diesel train). The University of Oxford offers staff a Discounted Bus Pass Scheme on particular routes operated by the Oxford Bus Company (including Thames Travel) and Stagecoach.

4) **Enjoy discovering Oxford,** with these links and things to do in Oxford. Also make use of your University staff card by visiting all of the colleges for free as well as all of the university libraries (like the Radcliffe Camera and Duke Humphreys’s Library).

5) **Oxford University clubs etc.**

Oxford University Sport list of sporting groups/clubs and facilities
The University Club membership for uni gym / cafe/ bar etc (£25 per yr) for our visitors from use of the gym /classes
Oxford University Student Societies list of associations and clubs (they may even be able to find a society of students from back home on here!)
Oxford University Newcomers Club for partners of people studying/working here, arranges days out and meetings and orientation etc.

6) Find out about gigs, talks & events
   Daily Info Events; University of Oxford Events; University of Oxford Talks; Interesting Talks Oxford; Oxford Sparks; Science Oxford

7) Children and families
   Children and families: The university childcare services department aims to provide nursery provision, and advices on a variety of parental needs. Be sure to consult the web page for salary sacrifice schemes, which are available to eligible university staff and provide significant savings for nursery, after school care etc.

   • Nursery (0-4 yr): For nursery and preschool age, consult university childcare services and county council nursery websites. Do not assume that a local nursery will automatically be able to provide for your needs. Both university and non-university nurseries are often at capacity with long waiting lists. Also, be aware that not all nurseries provide for all ages or provide government subsidised care for 3 & 4 year olds.

   • School: Children who are 4 years or older on Sep 1st are provided a place in a state school. Allocation of primary and secondary school places is coordinated by the local council based on both distance to your home and availability. The council website provides advice on locating your nearest primary/secondary schools, admissions and transfers. If moving into the area, you can also locate schools as part of your search through housing websites such as rightmove.co.uk and zoopla.co.uk, but cross check with the council website which catchment different locations fall in to.

   Things to do: there are lots of free and cheap things to do with children both in Oxford and in the surrounding villages and towns. Most communities have playgrounds, mother baby, sports and social clubs etc. Websites such as the oxfordmail, netmums and dayoutwiththekids may provide ideas, but your best resource are likely fellow parents of which there are many.
Tips for international new starters

8) **Visas.** Make sure you have up-to-date travel documents, as you will need a valid visa that will allow you to enter the UK. The Zoology personnel team will advise you prior to your arrival on exactly what you need to commence employment with the University of Oxford.

The most common visa route for ECRs is the Tier 2 General visa. For a summary of visa types and costs, see the [Oxford Staff Immigration Team](#) website. If you require a Certificate of Sponsorship (CoS) from the University, you need this before you apply for your visa (the Zoology personnel team will inform you about this). The CoS can be issued at most 3 months before your start date at the University. You must apply for your visa through a visa application centre in a country where you currently have a right to residence; find application centres [here](#). Processing times will vary depending on the application centre. When you apply for your visa, you will have to hand in your passport, so keep this in mind for any other travel plans! Your visa will allow you to enter the UK starting from a specific date (at most 2 weeks before your contract begins) and remain until 2 weeks after your contract ends.

9) **Healthcare.** If you’re staying in the UK for more than 6 months, you might be entitled to healthcare under the National Health Service (NHS). The Zoology personnel team will advise you whether you will be eligible for this. Shortly after arrival, you can search for local GPs near your home or college and register to one. Note that it is compulsory to be registered with a GP to receive any non-emergency health care, and can also be a requirement e.g. to obtain UK-based travel insurance.

You can find useful information about how health care works in the UK on the [NHS](#) website. Here you can also search for GPs by location.

If you are eligible for NHS and registered with a GP, you can also apply for a free [European Health Insurance Card](#).

10) **Bank accounts.** UK banks can be strict about requirements for opening a bank account and bank staff will need to verify your details before allowing you an account. On your first day at the Zoology Department, the Personnel staff can give you advice on how to open an account. Basically you will need a dated letter from HR confirming your job in Oxford as a proof of your staff status. You will also need to provide a residential address during your application (banks won’t accept a work or college address), so make sure you ask a friend to use their address temporarily! You can read more about opening a bank account from Oxford University [here](#) and [here](#). However not all banks will have the exact same requirements for proof of address, so it is worth checking from bank to bank (most main banks have branches very nearby around the Carfax Tower on High Street, central Oxford).

Some banks will strictly require a document such as a rental contract or utility bill; others will allow a letter from the University stating your address (which may have to be mailed to you at this address to prove you receive it here); others (e.g. Lloyd’s Bank as of June 2016) will accept applicants from certain countries with passport identification and no further proof of address.

Once you have your documents ready, you will have to make an appointment to go in person to a bank to open an account. At some banks you can arrange a same-day appointment if you arrive first thing in the morning, while at others you can be waiting for week, so again it’s
worth shopping around if you are in a hurry to get your account opened. Finally, your eligibility for a credit card will vary from bank to bank. Generally you will not be able to get a credit card until you have built up a credit rating in the UK, but some banks will have higher hurdles than others (e.g. type of visa/residence permit required). Check with the bank you are considering and ask your fellow international ECRs about their experiences!

11) Mobile phones. Most phones from overseas would work in the UK because the UK operates on the same GSM band as most countries. However, if you are coming from North/South America or Japan, it is worth checking if your phone may work in the UK. If you already have a SIM free phone, the Pay As You Go SIM card is the easiest choice. GiffGaff offers some good deals. If you make frequent overseas calls, it may be a cheaper option to buy Skype credits, which will allow you to call overseas landlines or mobiles. If you’ll be roaming a lot for work/play, then 3 UK (in 2017) offers great contracts where you can roam and use your monthly allowance in over 40 countries.

You generally won’t be able to get a Pay Monthly contract without a credit rating, and getting rejected for a contract can negatively affect whatever credit rating you have already managed to build up. If you are considering getting a Pay Monthly contract you stand a better chance to be accepted if you go for a SIM only option (you can usually upgrade to a contract with a handset in 3-6 months). You also have a better chance to be accepted if you go directly to the provider of your choice rather than a third-party service (such as Carphone Warehouse) or applying online. When you apply make sure that they take into account that you are new to the UK. Also note that different networks have different requirements for accepting you as a Pay Monthly customer.

12) Home internet. This website is useful for explaining your options for home Internet service (broadband) and comparing providers. You can also check comparethemarket.com to compare Internet packages (as well as other utilities and insurances) from various providers, although not all providers are listed here. Most providers require a contract of 12-18 months, although a few offer shorter options.

13) Insurance. The Money Advice Service provides an explanation of typical insurances available in the UK (e.g. home, car, and travel). Sites such as comparethemarket.com are again useful for comparing offers. Note that many travel insurance providers require you to have been a resident in the UK for at least 6 months before you are eligible for travel insurance cover.

We aim to keep this document up to date with new information and tips for newcomers, so please send through any tips you have to our ECRN (through our main contact).