

## YOUR PRACTICAL GUIDE

### BUYING A HOUSE

A lot of people will tell you that buying a house is one of the most traumatic things you'll ever do. Well, it's true that it's an important decision, and the process can be stressful at times, but there can be a great deal of joy and pleasure in it, too. The best way to make the process go smoothly is to be aware of what to expect at each step of the way – and hopefully this guide will give you a start.

How much can you afford?

Before you even begin to look at houses, you need to know how much you can afford. It's no good hankering after homes that are beyond your price range, and straining to find ways to raise the money. Once you know what's within reach, you'll find you're happy looking just at the ones you can afford – that's human nature. A quick call to a mortgage lender will give you a rough idea of what to expect, based on your income, the size of the deposit that you need to put down, and so on.

Private sale or estate agent?

You may choose to do your house hunting yourself, and this has become easier with the rise of the Internet. There are countless sites you can go to, simply by tapping in something like: 'Find a property' or 'house buying' into a web browser. Many of the sites have pictures, and it's easy to compare properties with a few clicks of the mouse. You can also look in the classified sections of newspapers – especially local ones. However, going through an agent has many advantages. Commission on the sale is charged to the vendor, and if you are a first-time buyer, you will be able to get valuable advice from the professionals, who know about the

area, the history of the house, how much to offer and so on. By liaising on your behalf with the vendor, they can also save you time, and some of the worry, if you are not sure of what to do.

Location, location, location

One of the most important considerations when looking for a house is the area in which it is situated. To some people, this is the most important factor, and they will be prepared to compromise on the size of the property in order to be in a locality of their choice. Remember – you can make all sorts of alterations to a house, but the neighbourhood stays as it is.

A good start is to drive around the area at different times of the day and get a feel for the general pattern of life. If you have children, have a look around at the time when school ends, see how safe the traffic is, and whether any of the schools look like the kind of places that you would be happy to send your children to. If you go into local shops, you can often strike up a conversation with the people who work there, tell them that you're thinking of moving there, and get a flavour of the area from what they tell you.

These are a few things to bear in mind when deciding where are to buy:

#### LOCAL AMENITIES

Have a look at the shops, public transport, leisure facilities, restaurants, pubs – and anything other things that are important to you.

#### SCHOOLS

If you have children, look into the quality of the schools. You can start by finding out where they stand in the league tables by looking in the Internet or the library. Asking people who work in the local shops is

often a good way to get an idea of the reputation of one school against another.

#### CRIME LEVELS

A visit to the local police station will give you a good idea about this, and about all sorts of other matters to do with the area.

Parking. If you have your eye on a particular street, it might look fine for parking during the day – but have a look at how many of the houses have been split into flats, as this can increase the number of cars vying for space. It's not a bad idea to drive along the street in the evening when most people are home, and see how easy it is to park at that time.

#### COUNCIL TAX

Find out how much your council tax is likely to cost, by calling the local council offices.

#### ANCIENT OR MODERN?

You should consider the type of house that you are after. An older house may seem to have more character, but if it hasn't been well looked after, the maintenance on it can be higher than on a newer property. Heating costs can also be higher on older houses, especially if they don't have double glazing.

#### VIEWING A PROPERTY

Once you have a good idea of what you are looking for, and you've narrowed down your search, it's time to step through the doors of a few. Always carry a pen and a notebook around with you, and take notes of everything

you see. Once you start looking at a lot of places, it's very easy for them all to merge together in your mind, unless you have something to remind you of each one.

#### HOW MUCH CAN YOU BORROW?

There is no fixed rule about how much a mortgage company will lend you, but in the past the amount tended to be up to 3.25 times your salary if you were doing it on your own, plus the total amount of a partner's salary if you were buying with someone else. Lately, with the rise in property prices, these have increased in some cases up to as much as five times an individual salary, or up to 2.75 times your joint earnings.

#### OTHER COSTS

Besides the mortgage, you will also have to allow for the following:

Legal fees of £400 or more.

Land registry fee of £100.

Other searches of around £70.

Local authority search fees of £100 for London and £60 elsewhere.

Stamp duty at:

None below £60,000.

1% on sales between £60,000 and £250,000

3% between £250,000 and £500,000

4% above £500,000.

Mortgage valuation survey at £170.

Full structural survey, from £270 upwards.

## MAKING AN OFFER

Once you have decided on the house that you want to buy, the next thing is to put in an offer for it. But before you do, you should make sure of a few things first.

## WHAT TO OFFER

By now, you will know the asking price, so you should check that this is fair by comparing those of similar houses in the windows of local estate agents, in the property sections of the newspapers and on property websites. These will not be exactly the same, as there are factors that might affect the price – such as condition, desirability of position and additions such as lofts and extensions.

There is likely to be a fair amount of to-ing and fro-ing before you arrive at a final figure, so you need to think about a price range for yourself. Start by considering the estimated value of the house. Then think of the lowest price that you dare to offer, and the highest sum that you would be prepared to pay. Most people make the first offer at between 5% and 10% below the asking price. If you can arrive somewhere in the middle, you are doing well.

## NEGOTIATION

Negotiating is, to a certain extent, a game of bluff on both sides, so there are a few ways that you can keep on top of the game. Nowadays, a seller will be expecting you to negotiate, so it's likely that the asking price will be higher than they eventually expect to get. If you are the only person making an offer, you

will be in a better position, but even in this instance, the vendors may lead you to believe that there are others in the running. You can test this out by calling their bluff a little: if they're digging their heels in, you can say that you're also interested in another property at a better price, and that if your competitor is willing to pay the money, they should offer it to them. If they give some ground straight away, they may well be bluffing.

However, if they stand firm, it's possible that someone else has made an offer. If you're still keen, you should decide what is your top limit, then tell the owner that you will try to increase your mortgage limit if they can give you another day, and ask them to hold off until you call back with a decision.

As a general rule, never rush into anything – always arrange to give a decision a few hours later. This gives you time to think things over, and means that you don't appear over-keen – any sign that you really want the house could help to bump up the price. Always keep a detached attitude, no matter how excited you may be, and don't get too friendly with the owners.

If the house has been for sale for a long time, the vendors might be willing to accept a lower price, and if you are not part of a chain – and not dependent on other people for the sale of your own house – you will also be a more attractive buyer, which which puts you in a better negotiating position.

If you are dealing with estate agents, remember that they are on commission. They are acting on behalf of the vendor, and it is their business to get the best price for their clients. On the other hand, in some

situations, if you keep your cards close to your chest and let them think that your money is tighter than it is, they might persuade the sellers to come down in price for the sake of making a sale.

Once you have come to an agreement on price, you need to make a formal offer. If you're searching by yourself, and not through an agent, you'll probably begin by making the offer over the phone. You should then confirm this in a letter. Make sure that you put at the top : 'Subject to contract and without prejudice'. This means that the contents of the letter are not legally binding.

#### ACCEPTANCE OF YOUR OFFER

Once your offer has been accepted, you must notify the mortgage company and your solicitor, if you are using one. You will then need to arrange a survey (see box)

#### SOLICITORS AND CONVEYANCING

The legal process of buying a house is known as conveyancing, and you can choose to do this yourself, or hire a solicitor. Unless you have experience in this area, it's simpler to go to the professionals. Any firm of solicitors will be able to help you, and you can start by ringing around a few to get the best price. You can also arrange the conveyancing online, and if you want to do a price comparison, you can get three online quotes at:

[http://www.mortgagesorter.co.uk/buying\\_home\\_diy\\_conveyancing.html](http://www.mortgagesorter.co.uk/buying_home_diy_conveyancing.html)

#### SEARCHES

When you buy a property, you are required to carry out a local authority search on the area, and if you are acting through solicitors, they will do this for you.

The kind of data gathered by the search includes information on legal restrictions or development proposals that might make a difference to your property. Other material covered includes: conservation, roads, planning history and outstanding building regulation matters. Most searches are ready by the next day, but some may take up to 10 working days, and you can expect to pay between £60 and £100.

#### EXCHANGE OF CONTRACTS AND COMPLETION

After making your written offer, the solicitors on both sides exchange contracts and agree a date to complete the sale – the date on which the house becomes yours. Upon signing it is usual to put down a deposit of 10% of the value of the property. After this, if you withdraw from the purchase, you will forfeit the deposit.

#### MOVING DAY

Once all this is done, and you are the owner of a new house, the next thing to plan is the move. If you are planning to hire a removal firm, get a few quotes first, as prices do vary. Check what cover you have if anything is damaged or lost in transit. Once in, and unpacked, there are a few more simple things to be done. Here are some of them:

Notify your local council of the move for council tax purposes

Arrange with the Post Office to redirect your mail.

Contact the water, electricity and gas companies – preferably a



few days in advance – and tell them you are the new owner. You'll need to give them metre readings from the day your new account starts. Also, close the accounts in your old home.

Get in touch with the telephone company and arrange a transfer of your old number, or a organize a new line.

Inform your bank, credit card companies, insurers, driving licence and car registration offices. At some point, you will need to inform your tax office, too.

Arrange with the local council to include you in the electoral register.

#### GAZUMPING

This is a situation in which the vendors of a house, receive a higher offer before you have exchanged contracts, and sell to someone else. Gazumping tends to happen when house prices are on the rise, and buyers outnumber sellers. It can cause a great deal of trouble, especially if you are in a chain – leaving you homeless if you have exchanged contracts on your old home, or cause your sale to fall through if the buyers are not able to hold on while you look for somewhere else.

There is nothing you can do to avoid gazumping, but you can take some steps to minimize the risk. The first is to choose an agent who is against the practice. Some of these will ask the vendor to sign a written agreement after accepting an offer, to refuse any others.

Keep the vendors' agents informed of your progress, to reassure them that you are going ahead. You can also arrange for both sides to put down a deposit of 1.5% of the sale price, so that if one party withdraws the other keeps both deposits.

You can take out insurance against gazumping, which will cost more money, but may well be worth it in certain climates. You should also make sure that the house is clearly withdrawn from the market by making sure the estate agents take away all For Sale signs, and withdraw the property from their books.

If you are fortunate enough to live in Scotland, the system makes it more difficult to gazump, as all bids for a property have to be in on a certain date, and a decision is made from those. If the seller is offered more after that, the solicitor will not act on the new transaction, as doing so would be seen as professional misconduct. Other solicitors will also be reluctant to take over the contract.

#### TOXIC SUBSTANCES IN THE HOME

If you buy an old house, it is possible that it may contain asbestos, a fibrous substance which was used extensively for fireproofing. It has since been found to be extremely harmful if disturbed, and carries a high risk of causing cancers. You should ask your surveyor to look for asbestos, and report it to you. If there is evidence of any in the place, he or she will be able to arrange for it to be removed or managed by qualified professionals. If the asbestos is not damaged or exposed, it may not be necessary to take it away, but it can be treated or covered up so that it does no harm.

Old houses were also fitted with lead pipes, which can have a harmful effect on the brain – especially in children and pregnant women. However, water companies include an ingredient in the water supply, which forms protective coating over most lead pipes, and renders them harmless – but it does not always work on damaged pipes. There is, as yet, no legal obligation to remove lead pipes, but, in the interests of health you should have these

replaced by copper or plastic pipes.

## PROPERTY SURVEYS

When you are viewing a property, you can form a general idea of its general state of repair by looking out for a few basic things before you consider making an offer. If you don't have much money to spend on your home after buying it, being aware of its condition may help you to decide whether to go ahead or not. It might also be a factor in helping you to decide between two houses that you are interested in. Your assessment should not be a substitute for a proper survey, though.

## OUTSIDE THE HOUSE

### Roof

Have a look up at the house to see what kind of condition the roof is in. If it is a large one, it can be expensive to have it redone. If it looks bad, and you really like the house, there may be a case for asking the vendors to reduce the price accordingly. Doors and windows. You can get a good impression of how well a house has been maintained by looking at the condition of wooden doors and windows. If the paint is peeling and flaky, the house probably has been neglected – if the owners haven't attended to fairly simple work like painting, they are unlikely to have attended to more major items.

## INSIDE THE HOUSE

### Damp

You'll be able to tell from the smell if a house has dampness problems. A musty, mushroomy aroma is a give-away, as are signs of mould on walls or ceilings. Touch the surface of the walls, to check for moisture, for wallpaper that is coming away, for flaky

paintwork or recent patch-up jobs that might have been done to disguise what's underneath.

### Condensation

If the windows are steamed up, or the window-frames are rotting or flaking, there may be problems with ventilation in the house. Central Heating. Look to see what kind of heating system there is, and at the radiators to see how old it is. If it's electrical central heating, it will be expensive to run and probably not very efficient, so you can expect to have to renew it. Check what fuel the boiler runs on, as oil and solid fuel are expensive, and are best replaced by gas.

### Subsidence.

One of the main causes of subsidence is the proximity of large trees, whose roots draw the moisture from the soil surrounding a house, and cause the ground to shift. Diagonal cracks around doors and windows are signs of subsidence, and they are likely to be wider in summer – especially after a dry spell – than in winter.

Look out for cracks wider than the thickness of a 10p piece. If cracks on the outside match those on the inside, this is serious, as it's likely that they go right through. Even if the seller convinces you that the house has not moved recently – and even if it's true – signs like this can make a place difficult to sell if you decide to move on.

### Woodworm

Tiny holes in any wood are a sign of woodworm, often accompanied by fine wood dust and dry decay. This is not desirable, as it spreads very quickly, and can attack every wooden structure and

piece of furniture in the house.

#### Wiring

If the plug sockets all over the house are of the old-fashioned type – including ones with round holes – that means that the wiring will be, too, and you will need to have the place rewired.

There are three types of surveys apart from a basic valuation:

#### Mortgage Valuation Report

Before finally approving your loan, the mortgage company will want a basic survey to evaluate the property. This is not a technical report, and exists just to inform the lenders that the house is worth the money that they are lending against it.

#### Home Buyer's Report

This covers only parts of the house that are accessible or visible from the ground. If anything looks as though it might need attention – such as the wiring – the surveyor may recommend a more thorough investigation.

#### Full Structural Survey

If you want to be sure of what you are buying, a Full Structural Survey is recommended in every case, especially if the house is old. This takes a few hours, during which a thorough examination is made of all aspects of the property, including plumbing, wiring, the roof, and inspect for dampness, dry rot, woodworm and more besides.

If something is discovered that was not apparent when you made the offer, you will be in a position to ask your solicitor to withdraw the offer or renegotiate the price. You may even find out about issues – such as ground subsidence – that make you

want to withdraw your offer. This means that when you look at the next place, you will have to pay for another survey, so it's a good idea to set some money aside in case this happens. Surveys must be done by qualified chartered surveyors, so make sure that they have the letters: MRICS or FRICS after their names.

## FINANCE

### Mortgages

Almost everyone who buys a property needs to borrow the money to do so. This is usually done by taking out a mortgage, which is a loan advanced to you as a lump sum, which you then pay back over a period of years – usually 25 years. The mortgage company secures the property against the loan, and if you are not able to pay the instalments, they are entitled to reclaim it and resell it to repay the loan.

Nowadays, a mortgage lender may be a building society, a bank, an insurance company – or even a supermarket.

There are two main types of mortgages:

#### Repayment mortgages

This is the original form of mortgage, and the repayments are divided into two parts: the capital repayments and the interest payments. The capital is the amount that you borrowed to buy the house, and the interest is the fee that you pay to the lender, on a percentage basis, for advancing the money. Your monthly repayments are made up of a combination of interest and capital. Usually, in the first years, you pay mostly interest, and a small amount of capital, and as time goes on, you pay back more and more of the capital.

#### Interest only mortgages

With this type of mortgage, your repayments cover only the interest, and the capital is invested separately into a fund, which, by the end of the term, is expected to have grown enough to pay off all the interest, and leave you with money left over – often as a pension. This is less safe than a repayment mortgage, as it relies on the success of the fund that has been invested in

on your behalf. If it goes wrong, you may not have the money to pay for your home, and you could lose it.

#### HOME IMPROVEMENT FINANCE

When you are buying a home, it is important to take into account whether you need – or would like – to make some improvements to it. You should take this into account when applying for your mortgage, as you may be able to borrow an extra amount above than the sale price to pay for the works. Provided that you can afford the repayments, your mortgage lender may be happy to let you do this, especially if the improvements will add value to the property.

If you want to do this some time after you have bought it, your mortgage company may still be willing to arrange the finance, especially as the house may have increased in value. You can also borrow from another company, such as a bank, but you may be asked to provide some security on the loan, and since your mortgage company already has the property as security against their loan, it is usually simplest to arrange it through them.

The repayments are likely to be lower month-by-month than if you increase your mortgage, but they will be spread over a longer period, which means that in the end, you will probably be paying more. So, if the amount is not very large – say £10,000 or under, you may prefer to make higher repayments over a shorter time.

#### BUYING A FLAT

The main difference between buying a house and flat is that a house is treated as a completely independent building – even if it is terraced or semi-detached – standing on its own land. A flat is a dwelling that is part of another building, and the ownership of it can be more complicated.



There are two ways in which you can own a flat: by freehold and by leasehold.

A freehold is the ownership of the piece of land on which the building stands, for an indefinite period. When a house is divided into flats, the owner of the ground floor is usually the freeholder, and the flats above are subject to a leasehold. These are contracts of ownership for a set period of time – which can be anything up to 999 years.

The holder of a lease usually pays a nominal annual ground rent to the freeholder, and at the end of the leasehold period, the property reverts to whoever owns the freehold at that time. This has been the subject of controversy for some time, and in the case of blocks of flats, it is not unusual for the residents' association to purchase the freehold, so that the owners become joint owners.

So, if you are looking to buy a flat, the first thing to do is to check the status of the freehold or lease. If there is a lease on it, which has a long period left on it – in excess of 80 years – you need not worry too much, if you are not planning to stay too long. On the other hand, if the lease has only 30 years to run, your mortgage is over 25 years, and you are thinking of staying there, the flat will only be yours for five years once you have paid off the loan, before it becomes the property of the freeholder.

There can be advantages to being a freeholder as well. The terms of leases may vary from one to another, but the responsibility for the maintenance of the fabric of the building is often down to the freeholder, in exchange for the ground rent paid by the leaseholders. This can be expensive if the roof needs replacing, or there is a problem with the drains, gutters, pointing, outsides of doors and windows, maintenance of the common parts and so on. So it may be a relief not to have that

responsibility – especially if the ground rent that you are paying is low. If you are considering buying a freehold, it is something that you should also be aware of.

#### BOX

If the flat that you are interested in is in a purpose-built block, try to speak to the head of the residents' association, as they will be able to furnish you with all sorts of helpful information – such as how much maintenance charges are, and about any restrictions or responsibilities that you will have as an owner.

#### BOX

If you're buying a flat, it's worth doing a little research into the neighbours, as these can make a big difference to the quality of your life. A discreet call to the people living on either side is likely to give you fair idea about this – if they have been suffering from noise problems or other antisocial behaviour, they will probably be only too willing to warn you about it.

#### INSURANCE

When you take out a mortgage, the lender will require you to insure the building, so that if anything serious happens to it, they do not lose their investment. Buildings insurance covers such issues as fire, flooding, subsidence and damp problems. If you do not notify your mortgage lender that you are taking out your own buildings insurance, they may well arrange it themselves on your behalf, and charge you their rate – so it's advisable to shop around.

It's also advisable to take out contents insurance, which covers all the things in the home that are removable – goods that

would be regarded as possessions, and can even include carpets and the contents of your freezer. You are usually covered against such things as theft, fire, flooding, accidental damage. There are plenty of companies in this market, offering competitive policies, so – as always – shop around, and check the terms of a policy before taking one out. You can find them from television, newspaper and magazine advertisements, as well as on the Internet. You can save a lot of searching around by opening Yellow Pages and talking to a broker, who will be able to tell you about the best rates, and the best cover on offer.

BOX

#### PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

These are the contact details for a number of professional bodies that you can contact for information relating to buying or building a property. They may also deal with any complaints about professionals or contractors involved in the process. When hiring contractors, it is essential make sure that they belong to a recognized professional body.

National Association of Estate Agents

Arbon House

21 Jury Street

Warwick CV34 4EH

Tel: 01926 496800

Fax: 01926 400953

Email: [info@naea.co.uk](mailto:info@naea.co.uk)

British Association of Removers

3 Churchill Court

58 Station Road

North Harrow

Middlesex HA2 7SA  
Tel: 020 8861 3331  
Fax: 020 8861 3332  
Website: [www.bar.co.uk](http://www.bar.co.uk)

Confederation of Roofing Contractors  
72 Church Road  
Brightlingsea  
Colchester  
Essex CO7 0JF  
Tel: 01206 306600  
Fax: 01206 306200  
Website: [www.corc.co.uk](http://www.corc.co.uk)  
Email: [enquiries@corc.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@corc.co.uk)

The National Heating Consultancy  
PO Box 370  
London SE9 2RP  
Tel: 020 7936 4004

National House-Building Council  
England and Wales:  
Buildmark House  
Chiltern Avenue  
Amersham  
Bucks HP6 5AP  
Tel: 01494 434477  
Fax: 01494 735201  
Website: [www.nhbc.co.uk](http://www.nhbc.co.uk)

Homebuyers' helpdesk (to check if a builder is NHBC registered): 0845 845 6422

Solicitors' helpdesk: 0845 845 4055

National House-Building Council

Scotland:

42 Colinton Road

Edinburgh EH10 5BT

Tel: 0131 621 7300

Fax: 0131 313 1001

Website: [www.nhbc.co.uk](http://www.nhbc.co.uk)

National House-Building Council

Northern Ireland:

Holyrood Court

59 Malone Road

Belfast BT9 6SA

Tel: 028 9038 6000

Website: [www.nhbc.co.uk](http://www.nhbc.co.uk)

Federation of Master Builders

England and Wales

14-15 Great James Street

London WC1N 3DP

Tel: 020 7242 7583

Fax: 020 7404 0296

Website: [www.fmb.org.uk](http://www.fmb.org.uk)

The Law Society

113 Chancery Lane

London WC2A 1PL

Tel: 020 7242 1222

Fax: 020 7831 0344

Website: [www.lawsociety.org.uk](http://www.lawsociety.org.uk)

The Law Society of Scotland  
26 Drumsheugh Gardens  
Edinburgh EH2 7YR

Tel: 0131 226 7411  
Helpline: 0131 476 8137  
Fax: 0131 225 2934  
E-mail: [lawscot@lawscot.org.uk](mailto:lawscot@lawscot.org.uk)  
Website: [www.lawscot.org.uk](http://www.lawscot.org.uk)

The Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors  
Parliament Square  
12 Great George Street  
London SW1P 3AD  
Tel: 020 7222 7000  
Fax: 020 7222 9430  
Website: [www.RICS.org](http://www.RICS.org)  
Email: [info@rics.org](mailto:info@rics.org)

The National Housebuilding Council (NHBC)  
Buildmark House  
Chiltern Avenue  
Amersham  
Buckinghamshire HP6 5AP  
Tel: 01494 434477  
Fax: 01494 735 201  
E-mail: [reception@nhbc.co.uk](mailto:reception@nhbc.co.uk)  
Website: [www.nhbc.co.uk](http://www.nhbc.co.uk)

The Association of British Insurers (ABI)  
51 Gresham Street

London EC2V 7HQ  
Tel: 020 7600 3333  
Fax: 020 7696 8999  
E-mail: [info@abi.org.uk](mailto:info@abi.org.uk)  
Website: [www.abi.org.uk](http://www.abi.org.uk)

Council of Mortgage Lenders  
3 Savile Row  
London W1S 3PB  
Tel: 020 7437 0075  
Fax: 020 7434 3791  
E-mail: [info@cml.org.uk](mailto:info@cml.org.uk)  
Website: [www.cml.org.uk](http://www.cml.org.uk)

Leasehold Advisory Service  
70-74 City Road  
London EC1Y 2BJ  
Tel: 0845 345 1993  
Fax: 020 7253 2043  
E-mail: [info@lease-advice.org](mailto:info@lease-advice.org)  
Website: [www.lease-advice.org](http://www.lease-advice.org)

## BUILDING YOUR OWN HOME

### BUYING A PLOT

The first thing you need to do before you can start to think about building your own house is buying a plot of land.

A good place to start looking is in the back pages of the local paper for the area where you want to build. These will also contain ads for local estate agents, who might be able to offer you something, or keep an eye open and notify you if anything comes up. There may also be notification of land auctions, and of auctioneers in the same section of the paper. You might also get in touch with local developers, who may have bought land that they are not planning to use, and who may be able to sell you something. If your dream home is in the country, you might even have a word with some of the local farmers. You might even spend an evening or two in the local pub, and make some inquiries of people who live in the area. Be tactful, though, and get to know them a bit first.

Before you make any offers, though, it's essential that you find out first whether you're likely to get planning permission – we'll cover this in detail below.

Once you know where you want to build, you need to have a clear idea of exactly what you are looking for – the size, type of location and so on.

If you find somewhere that looks like what you want, it's easy to get carried away with the vision that you have for your new home and forget that there are other important things to consider besides the attractiveness of the location. You should look into the infrastructure, such as nearby roads, where the nearest water and electricity supplies are, and so on. Knowing about these before you start work can save a lot of trouble and money. You should also consider the local amenities, such as schools, shops,



proximity to a railway station, bus services and so on – even if you don't use all these yourself, they can make a big difference to the price and saleability of your property if you ever come to sell it.

Even the ground that the plot stands on is important to examine. The composition of the ground that you build on can affect the way that your house is made, and it's very important to know about this before you buy. It affects the kind of foundations that you need, and can have a significant impact on the cost of the work.

It's worth going to the local planning department and looking at a detailed ground map, to see if there are any ancient wells or old mines – or if there is any history of soil pollution from agriculture or industry. It might be easier and more reliable to seek the advice of a site engineer – you'll find them in the Yellow Pages under 'Civil Engineers' – who will be able to find out all the important information about the site.

There is no exact figure on the cost of self-build house, as they vary so much in size, materials, fittings, who does the work and all the rest, but it's possible to save between 20% and 50% compared with the cost of a tailor-made.

You may have the skills to carry out the work yourself, or the experience to hire contractors separately on a job-by-job basis, and act as the project manager yourself. If not, you will need to use a building firm.

If you are a complete newcomer to self-build, you would do best to start by browsing the shelves of your local bookshop, where there you will find a number of good publications on the subject. There are also several specialist magazines devoted to it, which you will find at larger newsagents. Reading up on the subject first will give you a good idea of what is involved, and you will also find an array of useful advertisements. If you are connected

to the Internet, check out these sites: [www.self-build.co.uk/](http://www.self-build.co.uk/) and [www.buildstore.co.uk](http://www.buildstore.co.uk)

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## KIT HOUSES

An attractive, and increasingly popular option among people interested in self-building is the kit home. These are usually made of wood, and not only are they attractive to look at, they are also economical to build. The properties of timber mean that the houses are low-maintenance, they are warm in winter and cool in summer, and some can even move with you if you ever decide to buy a plot somewhere else.

One company that makes these is Mbarkk ([www.mbarkk.co.uk](http://www.mbarkk.co.uk)), who specialize in log cabin-style houses sourced from suppliers in Baltic and Nordic countries, as well as Canada and the United States, and have an impressive range of designs. A three-bedroomed house from Mbarkk – just the cost of the building itself, excluding the land, foundations, mains, surveys and so on, is between £400 and £600 per square metre. This includes the cost of delivery and assembly, including double-glazed windows, internal and external doors and shingle roof covering. An added bonus is that they normally do not need planning permission, or they come under the mobile home act.

Another established supplier of wooden kit homes is the Scandinavian Systems range of Finlodge houses. These are not only very attractive and well-designed, but they represent terrific value for money. A four-bedroomed house with two bathrooms is priced at £19,300. This covers just the kit itself, and you'll have to find roughly the same amount to have it delivered and assembled. If you have the carpentry skills, you could put a house together yourself, but Scandinavian Systems may be able to put you on to a contractor in your area who has the experience with

their products, and will therefore be able to do the job quickly and properly.

However, not all local authorities are willing to give planning permission for these, as some regard the appearance of Scandinavian houses as a bit eccentric, and there may be some areas where they are not considered to be in keeping with the surroundings. So before you consider a house of this type, it is important to find out where you stand on this. But they are well worth investigating, all the same.

#### PLANNING PERMISSION

You need planning permission for almost any kind of building work – whether for a new home, or for alterations to an existing building. In planning law, development is defined as: 'The carrying out of building, engineering, mining or other operations in, on, over or under land, or the making of any material change in the use of any buildings or other land.'

Before you consider any kind of building work, you need to contact your local authority's planning department, explain to them what you are intending to do, and determine whether you need permission. It is essential to do this before you start work, as they on your application may make you undo work that is not permitted – which can be very expensive and painful.

Examples of the kind of work for which you need permission are:

- Dividing a house into separate dwellings, such as flats or bedsits.

- Putting a caravan on a piece of land for use as a dwelling.

- Converting a loft and adding a dormer window

- Erecting a large brick-built shed or outbuilding, either free-standing or attached to an existing building.

- Adding a fence to the front of a house in an open-plan estate.

The work would require making a new or wider access to a public highway.

Turning part of a home into a place of business, such as an office, shop or workshop. (You can obtain a free booklet from your local council, entitled 'Planning Permission: A Guide for Business', which offers guidelines on whether you are likely to need planning permission for working from home.)

Works that do not require planning permission include the following:

Enlargements or alterations to a roof, which are no higher than the existing one, and do not alter the shape of the building.

Small sheds, greenhouses and certain garages more than 5 metres away from the house.

Extensions to a house of no more than 70 cubic metres or 15% of the original detached or semi-detached house – subject to a maximum of 115 cubic metres, as long as the extension does not project beyond the front wall of the building, or is less than 20 metres from the road. It must also not exceed the highest point of the roof, and does not cover more than 50% of the total curtilage area – ie, the land on which the house stands.

Extension of no more than 50 cubic metres or 10% of a terraced house – subject to a maximum of 115 cubic metres on the same terms as for a detached or semi-detached house (see above).

Windows – in the case of dormer windows, these must not face a public highway, and do not increase the house's volume by more than 50 cubic metres for a detached or semi-detached house, or by 40 cubic metres for a terraced house.

Porches of up to 3 square metres in floor area, 3 metres in height, and more than 2 metres from the road.

Gates, walls and fences up to the height of 1 metre, beside a road, and 2 metres elsewhere.

However, as in all matters to do with any alterations, always check with your local planning office, in case there are any exceptions or mitigating circumstances that might affect your right to carry out the works. It's always better not to start than have to undo the job later.

#### HOW TO APPLY FOR PLANNING PERMISSION

The first thing you need to do is contact the Planning Office of your local Council, explain what you would like to do, and ask their advice.

If it looks as though you will need planning permission for the work, find out from them if there are any complications that they anticipate, and inquire about any amendments that you could make which might simplify the process or improve your chances of receiving permission. They will arrange for you to receive an application form, and let you know about fees and so on.

Find out from the Planning Office what type of application you need to make, and what kinds of drawings and plans you will need to submit to them. Sometimes it is best to make what is known as an outline application, to find out about council fees and so on before you spend money on architects' drawings and building specifications. Once you know where you stand, you will then need to fill in a full planning application later.

Once you have filled in the forms, return them to the Planning Office, with the fees, plans of the site and drawings of the proposed works. Within a few days, you will receive an acknowledgement of your application, and it will be placed on

the Planning Register at the council offices, where any member of the public is permitted to look at it. They will post a notice at the site, and sometimes in the local paper, or they may notify the neighbours. Then they will either prepare a report for the planning committee – composed of local councillors – or appoint a professional officer from the planning department to assess your application.

Planning decisions are made on consideration of good planning reasons – such as whether the works are in keeping with the area, whether they comply with regulations, whether the building is listed or in a conservation area and so on – and not simply on the basis of other people's objections.

You should expect the process to take up to eight weeks. Beyond that, the council will contact you to ask for written consent to extend the decision period. If they fail to do so, you should appeal to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions – or in Wales, to the National Assembly for Wales.

#### BOX

##### IF YOUR PLANNING APPLICATION IS REFUSED

The council has to give you reasons for why it has refused planning permission. If this happens, you should start by contacting the Planning Office directly, and inquire whether there are any alterations that might help your case. If this is so, you may be given the chance to resubmit the application with amended plans without further charge, if you do so within 12 months of the original application.

If this is not possible, you can make an appeal to the Planning Inspectorate. You must have your application in within six months of the decision. You can also do this if you have not received a decision within eight weeks of your application. For further

information on this, you can apply for a booklet: 'Planning Appeals – A Guide' from: The Planning Inspectorate, Temple Quay House, Bristol BS1 6PN. If your application is in Wales, address it to: Crown Buildings, Cathays Park, Cardiff CF10 3NQ.

#### BUILDING REGULATIONS

Once you have cleared the necessary permissions with the Planning department, and are ready to go ahead with the work, you will need to be aware of the Building Regulations. These are drawn up by the Building Control Department of the local authority to set a standard for design and building work for all types of properties. The regulations are set down with health and safety in mind.

You must receive approval when carrying almost out any kind of exterior or interior building work, including making changes to a heating system, the water flow, drains or anything else. There are few things that aren't covered, so you should contact your local council's Building Control Department before you commit to any contracts with builders, or buy any materials, if you are doing the job yourself.

There are two types of applications that you can make.

#### Building Notice

Of the two ways to apply, submitting a building notice is the simpler, and involves completing a form containing details of the work that you intend to do, with notification if you are adding an extension to the building. The form is accompanied by a 'block plan', which is a scale drawing showing the site in relation to the property boundaries and the surrounding streets and houses, and the proposed drainage. The drawing should be to a scale no smaller than 1:1250.

The purpose of this type of submission is to notify the the Building Control Department aware of the work going on, so that they can come and inspect its progress, to make sure that all regulations are being complied with. Issues such as plumbing and drainage are taken seriously – including the angles of the turns in pipes, provision of access points for unblocking them, the gradient of the water fall and so on – as they can affect the hygiene of the residents of that property as well as adjoining ones. Obviously, anything to do with electricity is also subject to rigorous inspection, too. If you have already undertaken a job before it has been inspected, and the council are not happy with it, you will be made to undo the work and do it to their satisfaction. If you have been doing anything that needs to be buried, such as drainage or foundations, contact the Building Control Department to look at it before you cover it up.

#### Full Plans Submission

A Full Plans Submission is made by means of a form, accompanied by drawings that show that the building work will comply with the necessary regulations. Unless you are an expert, you will need a professional to do this, such as a surveyor or an architect. The following items need to be included with the submission:

A plan of the site, on a scale to at least 1:1250, and the surrounding streets and properties. It should also show the details of any new elements, such as new buildings or extensions. For this, you can obtain an Ordnance Survey map from the local council, and mark the details on that.

Plans, with elevations and sections, giving full details of the proposed works. These will need to be to a scale of at least 1:100, and for certain works, may need to be to 1:50.



Structural calculations from an engineer if any alterations have been made to load-bearing structures such as walls, ceilings, rooves and so on.

Indication of any structures that will be beside or above a sewer.

If the job is relatively small, a Building Notice will probably do, but if there is a lot to be done, it is better to submit the Full Plans, so that the inspectors can give you an overview of the likely hitches, and enable you to clear up any problems at the start. Once they are happy, they will give approval for the work as a whole.

You need to submit the plans well before the work begins. If you are employing a builder, you should make sure that he or she arranges for these to be drawn up. If you are in any doubt about which is the right one, contact the council.

Having to make changes after a project has begun can be costly and time-consuming, especially if you are hiring a builder.

However, if you have already begun before receiving the proper consent, you can still apply for it to be granted retrospectively, by means of a 'Regularisation Certificate'.

However, you may be required to unearth drains and foundations, and you will have to put right anything that does not pass before you can proceed.

You will have to pay a fee, which will vary according to the type and scale of the operation, and from one local authority to another but for an extension of under 40 square metres in area, they would typically be around £350. For a Full Plans submission the fee is payable in two parts; The plan fee, which you pay when you submit the plans, and an inspection fee, which is payable

after the first inspection.

#### CONSERVATORIES

Nowadays, there are regulations covering the glazing of conservatories and the entrances. This has to do with energy conservation, The regulations covering the entrances vary according to whether you are using an an existing entrance or making a wider one, and there are standards for insulation, draft proofing and so on. As with all other aspects of home building and improvements, if you are in any doubt about what rules, get in touch with the Building Control Department before you start.

#### BOXOUT

##### INSPECTION STAGES

If you are building a structure from the ground up, there are various stages at which the inspectors like to come and look before you can go any further. These are:

Excavations ready for your foundations.

Concrete for the foundations.

Damp-proof courses.

Drains, before you cover them up.

Any steelwork, such as beams or joists, before you cover them up.