



Our Brief Guide to Buying a Residential Property in England

Buying a residential property

Buying a residential property can be a significant and complex investment. Whether you're a first-time buyer or a seasoned homeowner, there are many important factors to consider when purchasing a property. In this guide, we will provide you with valuable tips and insights to help you navigate the property market with confidence. As building surveyors, we will focus on the aspects of the property itself, highlighting key considerations for a successful purchase, and for avoiding hidden costs further down the line.

1. Determine Your Budget

Before you begin your property search, establish a clear and realistic budget. It is strongly advisable to get a mortgage agreement in principle from your chosen bank or building supplier so you have an indication of how much they would be willing to lend you, based on your personal financial circumstances. This isn't a mortgage promise, but it does give you a realistic idea of how much you may be able to spend. Take into account not only the actual purchase price but also additional costs like stamp duty, legal fees, mortgage fees and survey fees. Setting a budget helps you narrow down your options and avoid wasting time on properties that are out of your financial reach. Be prepared for hidden costs such as maintenance, repairs, and chancel fees. Remember that you will need a financial buffer to address unexpected overheads. Consider ongoing costs once you have bought your new property such as insurance and utilities as these can vary considerably dependent upon the type, age and size of property.

Money Supermarket have more details about mortgages here:

<https://www.moneysupermarket.com/mortgages/>

2. Location, Location, Location

The old adage remains true; the location of a property is crucial. Consider factors like accessibility to work, schools, green space, healthcare and amenities. Proximity to public transport links can be a significant advantage, especially in rural areas. Consider your daily commute; it can be well worth practicing this during rush hour to get a real time idea of how long it will take you. Research the neighbourhood's safety and community feel, as these can significantly impact your quality of life as well as the value of your property. Be sure to spend ample time in the neighbourhood and to talk to residents to get a real feel for the place.

The Which Area Comparison Tool can give you a picture of the area you are looking at compared to national averages on aspects such as school performance, property prices, happiness and life expectancy:

<https://www.which.co.uk/money/mortgages-and-property/mortgage-calculators/area-comparison-tool-where-should-i-buy-aYojA1H88Qxo>

3. Property Type and Size

Double check your property priority list and take care not to let your 'needs' and 'wants' become muddled. Consider the number of rooms, garden size and outbuildings with care and be mindful of maintenance costs and the impact this can have on available time. Your choice should balance your lifestyle, future needs and means. The latter is particularly important with older properties, especially those predating the 1930's. If you drive, consider the parking – it it's off road, how easy will it be to park near the property, and will that require a resident's permit? It is also worth finding out what the mobile and internet connection is like at the property, especially if you work from home. You can find these out here: <https://checker.ofcom.org.uk>

4. Property Condition

As building surveyors, we can't emphasise enough how important it is to assess the condition of a potential property. Take your time when looking round and do not allow yourself to be rushed – this is a big investment and it's important to have a good idea of the property's condition – and environmental issues – before making a commitment to purchase. Pay close attention to the structural integrity of the property, especially if it's an older building. Cracks, sagging, or signs of poor maintenance should not be overlooked or underestimated. Whilst your professional surveyor will provide advice and guidance, be sure to take an active role yourself as the surveyor will not involve themselves in subjective matters of taste, decoration or similar. Don't be afraid to ask the estate agent questions. If the property has had any work done, such as an extension, ask to see the planning permission and builder's receipts and guarantees.

Before you commission your surveyor reflect upon your viewing and consider if you have any concerns to highlight before the inspection, here are some typical examples:

- a. Did you see any signs of structural issues? Cracks in walls, uneven floors, or misaligned doors and windows that you think your surveyor should look at.
- b. Did you smell or notice any dampness or mould? These issues can be costly to address and may also pose health risks.
- c. Did the roof look like it was sagging or were there damaged tiles? A damaged or ageing roof can lead to leaks and other problems. Many modern roofs have a life expectancy of only 15-30 years, depending on materials, and a new roof is an expensive repair.
- d. Was the heating working? Its not unreasonable to turn on taps and flush toilets as you look around.
- e. How did the lights and sockets look? Older fittings might suggest a need for upgrading. You could ask the vendor or estate agent if they know when the electrical system was last checked.

f. What were the windows and doors like? Be aware of drafts, peeling paint on windowsills, signs of wear and tear and binding doors that might signify a structural problem.

5. Legal Considerations

Property transactions involve a fair amount of legal paperwork. It's essential to hire a solicitor or conveyancer experienced in residential property transactions to ensure everything is in order. They will handle tasks like searches, contracts, and land registry matters. Encourage your solicitor to ask any necessary questions of your surveyor and to work as a team.

6. Survey Options

Whilst home surveys are not a legal requirement, it is advisable to engage a building surveyor to assess the condition of your potential new home in detail. Buying a property is a big investment and the costs of unknown faults and defects can be considerable, so it is worth knowing exactly what you are getting before committing to buy. There are several survey options available in England, including:

RICS Level 2 Home Survey: A report, suitable for most properties, offering insight into potential issues and recommended repairs. This type of survey is often advised by mortgage advisers and others; however, it is not recommended where significant works/alterations have been carried out as it does not provide the surveyor with the time or reporting capacity required. Be aware that the Level 2 does involve a sampling approach, so do not expect the surveyor to check every door and window. The Residential Property Surveyors Association Home Survey provides a step up by comprising a 'full inspection' without the sampling approach.

RICS Level 3 Home Survey or RPSA Building Survey: The most comprehensive survey, suitable for older properties, those in poor condition and properties that have been significantly altered. It provides a thorough analysis of the property's construction and condition, advice as to how problems could be addressed and outlines the surveyor's thoughts regarding hidden potential defects.

We advise that you consult with your surveyor to determine the most appropriate survey for your chosen property. Be wary of any surveyor offering reports in 24 hours, the normal working day is only 8 hours long so if you deduct travel time, a lunch break, a desk top study, a courtesy call after the inspection, proof reading and editing and normal admin, how long is actually left for inspecting the property and writing your report?

7. Property History

Think about the property's history, many modernised historic properties can look highly desirable whilst, in reality, they may be upgraded farmworkers buildings built on a budget during the agricultural revolution, converted commercial/agricultural buildings or re clad system-built houses erected to solve the housing shortage post WWII. Old maps, aerial photographs and community history sights are great sources of information.

8. Energy Efficiency

In England, properties are rated for energy efficiency. Unless the property you are interested in is a listed building, there should be an Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) available which sets out how energy-efficient the property is. In theory, a higher rating can mean lower utility bills and a smaller carbon footprint. Common feedback from clients is that EPC's were optimistic, therefore it is a good idea to consider asking the current owners for recent utility bill information to gauge how much you might expect to pay for these services. Remember, just because an older property is double glazed it does not mean that it will be energy efficient – windows normally make up a very small part of the wall area of a building.

9. View the Property Multiple Times

Visit the property at various times of the day and week to assess how natural light and noise levels change. This will give you a better sense of what it's like to live there. Try visiting when it's raining, to check that the pipes, gutters, and grading of the land are redirecting rainwater efficiently and that there are no surface water issues. Where possible, we recommend viewing between Autumn and Spring as moisture related issues are likely to be more easily detected.

10. Negotiate Wisely

Once you find a property you like, it's time to make an offer. Be prepared to make a fair offer based on market research and the property's condition. If the property has been on the market for quite a while, the seller may be prepared to drop the price for you. Your agent and legal adviser can guide you through the negotiation process. Be prepared to adjust your offer should your surveyor discover undisclosed defects of a significant nature material nature that fall outside of the bounds of normal maintenance. You should ensure that you allow yourself time to obtain and compare any quotes for significant works and to establish whether professional, planning and building control fees may need to be taken into consideration. Whatever you do, do not rush or allow yourself to be rushed.

11. Financial Planning and Mortgage

Should you require finance, speak to a financial advisor or mortgage broker to determine the best mortgage option for your situation. Ensure you have a clear understanding of the interest rates, repayment terms, and any additional costs associated with your mortgage, such as mortgage valuation and arrangement fees. Be aware that a lender may withdraw their offer where a property is found to be of non-traditional construction. Living above commercial properties or in a new build can affect the lender's willingness to mortgage or the amount they will offer. Most mortgage lenders have a panel of solicitors they will work with – check the list before hiring a solicitor.

A mortgage lender will check your credit score as part of their process – it is advisable to look at your score prior to making an application and fixing any errors. It is also best not to apply for a personal loan or car finance directly before applying for a mortgage as this will affect your score. Mortgage lenders will also check your details on the electoral roll as part of their background checks. If you are not on the roll, you can register here:

<https://www.gov.uk/register-to-vote>

To check your credit score for free, go to Experian:

<https://www.experian.co.uk>

12. Home Insurance

Obtain insurance quotes as part of the initial property hunting process. Be aware that historic properties need to be insured by an insurer who really understands them and has the infrastructure to support you in your time of need. Historic properties should be insured to an agreed rebuild value and the insurer should visit to help you establish a figure – never use the price paid for the property or asking price as the properties rebuild value. Most mortgage lenders will insist upon this at the time of exchanging contracts, and it's a wise decision to get home insurance even though it's not mandatory.

13. Legal and Contractual Obligations

Understand your contractual obligations and timelines. Ensure you meet all deadlines, especially related to the exchange of contracts and completion dates. Keep clear lines of communication with other parties involved in the sale.

14. Local Authority and Planning Permission

Check with the local authority planning website about any planning permissions or restrictions that may affect your property. If you plan to make essential alterations, ensure you have the necessary approvals in place prior to proceeding. Your surveyor should be able to provide an initial feasibility report which may help you decide whether you are likely to be able to adapt your new home as you would like to (at additional cost). If you are planning to extend or adapt, consider asking your surveyor to produce a measured survey and concept plans that you can use to obtain pre-planning advice from the local authority planning department. Remember, the more the surveyor can do in one site visit the more you can save on fees.

15. Environmental and Safety Concerns

Pay close attention to any potential environmental hazards in the area, such as flooding or subsidence, natural hazards, water quality and pollution. If you're using a conveyancer or surveyor they will carry out these searches for you; however, you should read their reports and make sure the findings/opinions match. You may also want to do your own research into air quality using publicly available sites like <https://naei.beis.gov.uk/emissionsapp/>

16. Surveyor Recommendations

If you hire a professional surveyor, pay careful attention to their recommendations. They can provide valuable insights into the property's condition and potential repair costs, as well as the urgency and potential impact of any issues. Be sure to talk to your surveyor after you have read their report and noted down any questions you may have. Your surveyor should be prepared to run through these in reasonable detail and clarify any points as necessary.

17. Property Valuation

The valuation of the property is an important factor for securing your mortgage. Your lender will conduct a valuation to ensure the property's value is in line with your mortgage amount. Remember that a valuation survey involves very little in the way of property inspection and should not be relied upon for any purpose other than the valuation itself.

18. Property Chains

In some cases, your property purchase may be part of a chain, which can complicate the process. Ensure clear communication and coordination with all parties involved in the chain to prevent unnecessary delays. The existence of a chain does not mean that you should rush or skip important steps of the pre purchase process.

19. Homebuyers' Rights

Understand your rights as a homebuyer, including the right to a fair and transparent transaction. Seek legal advice if you encounter any issues or concerns.

20. Freehold vs Leasehold

It's important to be clear about whether the property is Freehold or Leasehold. Leasehold means that you own the property, usually for a set period, but not the land it's on. A leaseholder has to pay ground rent to the landowner, or

Freeholder, and will often pay a service charge. These can increase over time. A Leaseholder will usually have to get permission from the Freeholder to make alterations to the property, such as an extension. A Freeholder, conversely, owns both the property and the land it is on.

You can find more information here:

<https://hoa.org.uk/advice/guides-for-homeowners/i-am-buying/leasehold-v-freehold-whats-the-difference/>

21. Other factors to consider:

- Mortgages can take a long time to process – it can take 3-6 weeks from submitting your application to receiving a decision.
- Have a look behind and under furniture such as sofas to check the condition of walls and floors for any hidden defects.
- Most people move house on a Friday. Consider another day for more availability and, potentially, lower removals costs.
- Don't forget to pay as much attention to the exterior of the building as you would to the inside – look for telltale signs such as cracks in the walls or damage to window frames.
- Make sure you're aware what the seller will be taking and leaving – will they leave the lampshades, curtains or cooker, for instance?
- The government has various schemes to help first time buyers and existing homeowners

<https://www.moneyhelper.org.uk/en/homes/buying-a-home/government-schemes-for-first-time-home-buyers-and-existing-homeowners>