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ESTATE AGENTS & COMPANY

BUYER'S GUIDE · ALEXANDER JACOB

# The UK Property Buyer's Guide.

A practical guide for first-time buyers, home movers and property investors. From setting your budget to collecting your keys.

*Honest. Human. Here for You.*

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# Your Purchase at a Glance: Budget and Search.

A purchase in England and Wales takes around five months on average. Here's the short version. The full guide has the detail.

## 01 Set Your Budget.

Count the deposit, mortgage repayments, legal fees, survey, property tax, moving costs and a contingency fund. Keep some money back for after completion.

TAKEAWAY

**The asking price is only part of the cost.**

## 02 Get an Agreement in Principle.

Speak to a lender or qualified mortgage adviser. An agreement in principle shows what a lender may lend. It isn't a final offer or a guarantee.

TAKEAWAY

**Know your ceiling before you view.**

## 03 Decide What Matters.

Location, commute, schools, parking, outdoor space, condition and resale. Split must-haves from nice-to-haves.

TAKEAWAY

**A clear list makes viewings quicker.**

## 04 Know the Property Type.

Houses, flats, rural homes and new builds each come with their own checks. Flats mean service charges, lease terms and building safety.

TAKEAWAY

**Check what's specific to the type you're buying.**

## 05 Understand the Tenure.

Freehold, leasehold or commonhold. For a leasehold flat, ask about years left, charges, planned works and cladding.

TAKEAWAY

**A short lease can affect your mortgage and resale.**

# Your Purchase at a Glance: View and Offer.

## 06 View With a Checklist.

View more than once, at different times of day. Look for damp, roof and ceiling stains, window condition, boiler age, wiring, water pressure and cracks. Outside, check boundaries, parking, flood risk, noise, mobile signal and broadband.

TAKEAWAY

**Fresh decoration can hide problems.**

## 07 Book the Right Survey.

A lender's valuation is for the lender. Choose a RICS Level 1, 2 or 3 survey, or a specialist inspection, to suit the property's age and condition.

TAKEAWAY

**If the survey finds problems, get quotes and advice before you commit.**

## 08 Offer on Evidence.

Use recent sold prices, condition, time on the market and your own budget. Ask the agent about the seller's chain, what's included and any known issues.

TAKEAWAY

**Never offer more than you can comfortably afford.**

## 09 Know When It's Binding.

In England and Wales, an accepted offer usually isn't binding until exchange. In Scotland, a binding contract can arise through missives.

TAKEAWAY

**Your solicitor will explain each milestone.**

# Your Purchase at a Glance: Legal Work to Keys.

## 10 Instruct a Solicitor.

Provide ID, proof of funds and mortgage details. They'll check the title, searches and contract.

TAKEAWAY

**Ask questions until the contract makes sense to you.**

## 11 Work Out the Tax.

SDLT in England and Northern Ireland, LTT in Wales, LBTT in Scotland. Eligible first-time buyers in England and Northern Ireland pay no SDLT on the first £300,000 of purchases up to £500,000.

TAKEAWAY

**Use the official calculator for your nation.**

## 12 Check What Gets Missed.

Planning and building regulations paperwork, flood risk, boundaries, insurance from exchange, joint ownership terms and new-build contracts.

TAKEAWAY

**Missing paperwork is your conveyancer's job to investigate.**

## 13 Exchange and Complete.

Confirm your mortgage, funds, insurance and moving date. Verify your solicitor's bank details by phone before sending money.

TAKEAWAY

**Never trust changed bank details sent by email.**

## 14 Settle In.

Read meters, sort council tax, update your address, check alarms and locks, and set money aside for repairs.

TAKEAWAY

**Keep every certificate and guarantee.**

**Call 01777 566400 for more information.**

INTRODUCTION

Buying a property is one of the biggest financial decisions you'll make. This guide takes you through the process, from setting your budget and finding the right property to making an offer, completing the legal work and collecting your keys.

It's a practical guide for anyone planning a purchase. The legal and tax details can differ between England and Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland, so it's important to understand which rules apply to the property you're buying.

01

# Before You Start Looking.

A good purchase starts with good preparation. Before arranging viewings, work out what you can afford, what type of property suits your needs and how long you intend to stay.

### Establish Your Budget.

Work out your deposit, likely mortgage repayments, legal fees, survey costs, property taxes, moving costs and a contingency fund for unexpected expenses.

### Obtain a Mortgage Agreement in Principle.

If you need a mortgage, speak to a lender or qualified mortgage adviser. An agreement in principle gives an indication of what a lender may be willing to lend. It isn't a final mortgage offer or a guarantee of approval.

### Decide on Your Priorities.

Consider location, commuting, schools, transport, parking, outdoor space, property condition, accessibility and future resale prospects. Separate essential requirements from desirable extras.

02

# Calculate the Full Cost of Buying.

Don't base your decision on the asking price alone. Your total purchase cost will depend on your deposit, mortgage, property type and location.

| EXPENSE | WHAT TO ALLOW FOR |
|---|---|
| **Deposit** | Commonly 5–20% or more of the purchase price, depending on your circumstances and mortgage product |
| **Mortgage Fees** | Product, arrangement, valuation and other lender fees, where applicable |
| **Solicitor or Conveyancer** | Legal work, searches, registration and related disbursements |
| **Survey** | An appropriate inspection of the property's condition |
| **Property Transaction Tax** | SDLT, LTT or LBTT, depending on the UK nation and your circumstances |
| **Moving Costs** | Removal company, van hire, storage and utility changes |
| **Repairs and Furnishings** | Essential work, appliances, decorating and furniture |
| **Ongoing Expenses** | Council tax or local equivalents, insurance, utilities, maintenance and any service charges |

IMPORTANT

Keep some money available after completion. Spending every available pound on the deposit and purchase costs can leave you exposed to unexpected repairs or changes in income.

03

# Understand the Different Types of Property.

### Detached House.

Offers more privacy and no shared walls, but may cost more to buy, heat and maintain.

### Semi-Detached or Terraced House.

Often good value for families and first-time buyers. Check noise, parking, roof condition and shared boundaries.

### Flat or Apartment.

May offer convenient locations and less responsibility for external maintenance, but check service charges, lease terms, building safety and planned major works.

### Cottage or Rural Property.

Check private drainage, water supply, access rights, roof and wall condition, heating systems, broadband and exposure to flooding.

### New-Build Property.

Check the developer's track record, warranty, specification, estimated completion date, estate charges and any unfinished communal areas.

04

# Freehold, Leasehold and Commonhold.

Understanding the legal ownership structure is essential, especially when you're buying a flat.

| OWNERSHIP | WHAT IT MEANS | WHAT TO CHECK |
|---|---|---|
| **Freehold** | You own the property and the land it stands on, subject to legal restrictions and obligations. | Boundaries, access rights, covenants and maintenance responsibilities. |
| **Leasehold** | You own the right to occupy the property for the term of a lease. The land or building is subject to a superior ownership interest. | Years remaining, ground rent, service charges, restrictions and lease extension costs. |
| **Commonhold** | A form of ownership allowing individual ownership of a flat alongside shared ownership and management of common parts. | The commonhold association, shared costs and management arrangements. |

Commonhold isn't widely used across the existing UK housing market. In Scotland, property ownership structures differ from the traditional English and Welsh leasehold system.

## Buying a Leasehold Flat: Questions to Ask Before You Commit.

- How many years remain on the lease?
- What are the current annual service charges and ground rent?
- Have charges increased significantly in recent years?
- Are major repairs or building works planned?
- Are there restrictions on pets, subletting, alterations or letting the property?
- Is there any building safety remediation or cladding issue?
- Are there disputes, debts or problems with the freeholder or managing agent?

Ask your conveyancer to review the lease and explain any unusual or costly obligations. A short lease or a substantial future repair bill can affect mortgage eligibility and resale value.

Leasehold law is changing under the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024. Some parts are already in force, such as no longer needing to have owned a lease for two years before claiming a lease extension or buying the freehold, while others aren't yet, so check the latest GOV.UK leasehold guidance [1].

LINKS IN THIS SECTION

1. GOV.UK leasehold guidance gov.uk/government/publications/leasehold-toolkit/leasehold-toolkit-england

05

# What to Look for When Viewing a Property.

Try to view the property more than once if you can. Visit at different times of day and, where practical, in different weather.

## Interior Inspection Checklist.

- **Damp and Mould:** Look for musty smells, staining, peeling paint, condensation and mould behind furniture.
- **Roof and Ceilings:** Check for water stains, sagging ceilings and evidence of previous leaks.
- **Windows and Doors:** Look for rot, failed double glazing, draughts and security problems.
- **Heating and Hot Water:** Ask about the boiler's age, servicing history and energy costs.
- **Electrical Installation:** Check the condition of sockets, the consumer unit and visible wiring, and ask about inspection records.
- **Plumbing:** Test taps, flush toilets, and look for leaks or poor water pressure.
- **Structure:** Look for significant cracks, uneven floors, signs of movement or alterations that may need further investigation.
- **Insulation and Energy Efficiency:** Review the Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) and ask about heating and running costs.

## Exterior and Location Checklist.

- Inspect roof coverings, gutters, brickwork, render and external timber.
- Check garden boundaries, fences, retaining walls, drainage and trees.
- Confirm the parking arrangements and whether any space is legally included in the sale.
- Investigate flood risk, coastal erosion where relevant, and nearby development plans.
- Check noise from roads, railways, pubs, businesses or neighbouring properties.
- Test mobile reception and check broadband availability.
- Visit the area during rush hour and in the evening.
- Check local amenities, transport, schools and future resale appeal.

A viewing is not a substitute for a professional survey. Cosmetic decoration can conceal problems, and some defects aren't visible without specialist investigation.

06

# Surveys and Property Valuations.

A mortgage lender's valuation is mainly for the lender's benefit. It doesn't replace an independent assessment of the property's condition.

| TYPE OF INSPECTION | BEST SUITED TO |
|---|---|
| **RICS Level 1 Home Survey** | Relatively modern properties in good condition, where a basic overview is appropriate. |
| **RICS Level 2 Home Survey** | Conventional properties in reasonable condition, including many typical houses and flats. |
| **RICS Level 3 Building Survey** | Older, larger, altered or unusual properties, or those with suspected significant defects. |
| **Specialist Inspection** | Specific concerns such as subsidence, timber decay, roofing, electrics, drainage or suspected asbestos. |

Choose a suitably qualified surveyor and discuss the property's age, construction and any concerns before booking. A survey may recommend further investigation, which can add cost and time.

**If the survey reveals problems:** Get repair estimates, ask your conveyancer for advice and consider renegotiating the price, requesting an agreed remedy or withdrawing before you become legally committed, subject to the applicable rules.

07

# Making an Offer.

Before deciding what to offer, research recent sold prices for comparable properties, not just current asking prices.

## What to Consider.

- The property's condition and any likely repair costs.
- How long it has been on the market and whether the asking price has changed.
- Whether similar properties have sold nearby and at what prices.
- Your mortgage valuation and maximum affordable purchase price.
- Whether you're in a property chain or can offer a flexible completion date.
- Which fixtures, fittings, appliances and other items are included.

You can usually submit an offer through the estate agent. In England and Wales, an accepted offer is generally not legally binding until contracts are exchanged. Scotland has a different process, where a binding contract can arise through the exchange of formal legal letters known as missives.

## Questions to Ask the Estate Agent.

- Why is the seller moving?
- How long has the property been marketed?
- Have any offers been made or accepted previously?
- Is the seller buying another property, and is there a chain?
- What is included in the sale?
- Are there known disputes, defects, planning issues or alterations?
- What completion date would the seller prefer?

You should never feel pressured into offering more than you can comfortably afford. A property that's over your budget may not be the right purchase, even if it looks ideal.

08

# The Legal Process: Conveyancing.

Once an offer is accepted, your solicitor or licensed conveyancer investigates the property and prepares the legal work needed to transfer ownership.

01 **Instruct Your Solicitor**
Provide identification, proof of funds, mortgage details and information about the source of your deposit.

02 **Legal Checks and Searches**
Your solicitor reviews title documents, boundaries, access rights, planning matters, restrictions and relevant searches.

03 **Survey and Mortgage Approval**
Arrange an appropriate survey, resolve any concerns and get your formal mortgage offer.

04 **Review the Contract**
Make sure your solicitor has answered your questions and that the price, included items, completion date and legal obligations are correct.

05 **Exchange Contracts or Reach the Applicable Binding Agreement**
In England and Wales, exchange normally makes the transaction legally binding. In Scotland, the equivalent point is generally conclusion of missives.

06 **Completion and Registration**
The purchase money is transferred, ownership is completed, keys are released and the legal registration process is carried out.

The legal process, and the point at which you become committed, vary by jurisdiction. Your solicitor should explain the relevant milestones before you go ahead.

09

# Property Taxes Across the UK.

The tax payable depends on where the property is, the purchase price, whether you qualify for relief and whether you already own another property.

| LOCATION | PROPERTY PURCHASE TAX |
|---|---|
| **England** | Stamp Duty Land Tax (SDLT) |
| **Northern Ireland** | Stamp Duty Land Tax (SDLT) |
| **Wales** | Land Transaction Tax (LTT) |
| **Scotland** | Land and Buildings Transaction Tax (LBTT) |

## First-Time Buyers in England and Northern Ireland.

Eligible first-time buyers may receive SDLT relief on qualifying purchases up to £500,000. Under the current rules, qualifying buyers pay no SDLT on the first £300,000 and 5% on the portion above that amount up to £500,000. Purchases above £500,000 don't qualify for this relief.

## Wales and Scotland.

In Wales, the main residential LTT nil-rate threshold is £225,000, with different rates for additional residential properties. In Scotland, the LBTT bands and any Additional Dwelling Supplement need to be checked separately.

## Check Before You Commit.

Tax thresholds and rates can change. Always calculate your likely liability using the official service for the relevant nation before committing to a purchase.

- Calculate Stamp Duty Land Tax: England and Northern Ireland
  tax.service.gov.uk/calculate-stamp-duty-land-tax
- Calculate Land Transaction Tax: Wales
  gov.wales/land-transaction-tax-calculator
- Land and Buildings Transaction Tax: Scotland
  revenue.scot/taxes/land-buildings-transaction-tax

10

# Important Checks That Buyers Sometimes Overlook.

### Planning Permission and Building Regulations.

If the property has an extension, loft conversion, conservatory or structural alteration, ask for the relevant planning permissions, building regulations completion certificates and guarantees where applicable. Your conveyancer should investigate the legal position if paperwork is missing.

### Flooding and Environmental Risks.

Investigate flood risk, historic flooding, contaminated land and other environmental concerns. A property can be attractive but expensive to insure or repair if the risks haven't been understood.

### Boundaries, Access and Rights of Way.

Check whether fences, driveways, paths and parking areas match the legal title. Find out whether neighbours or the public have rights of access over any part of the property.

### Insurance.

Arrange suitable buildings insurance when your legal adviser says it's required. In England and Wales, buyers commonly need cover from exchange of contracts, but the exact position can depend on the contract. In Scotland, check the missives with your solicitor.

### Buying With Another Person.

If you're buying jointly, agree how the deposit and ongoing expenses will be shared. Ask your solicitor about the form of joint ownership, what happens if one person wants to sell, and how each person's contribution will be protected.

### New-Build Homes.

Review the reservation agreement, payment terms, specification, warranty, snagging process and expected handover date. Confirm what happens if construction is delayed and whether the property will be mortgageable on the proposed completion date.

11

# Exchange, Completion and Collecting Your Keys.

Before completion, your solicitor will give you a financial statement showing the balance required, including outstanding purchase funds, taxes and legal costs.

## Final Checklist.

- ☐ Your mortgage offer is in place and all lender conditions have been satisfied.
- ☐ Your survey concerns have been addressed or accepted.
- ☐ Your solicitor has confirmed the legal checks are satisfactory.
- ☐ You understand the contract and any continuing obligations.
- ☐ Your deposit and remaining funds are ready.
- ☐ Buildings insurance is arranged for the appropriate date.
- ☐ Your completion date and moving arrangements are confirmed.
- ☐ You have verified your solicitor's bank details independently before transferring money.

### Protect Yourself Against Property Fraud.

Criminals sometimes impersonate solicitors or send fraudulent bank details by email. If you receive new or changed payment instructions, phone your solicitor on a trusted number you already have, not a number given in the suspicious email. Confirm the account details before transferring money.

On completion, the purchase money is transferred and you can collect the keys once the seller's solicitor confirms completion. Your solicitor will deal with the applicable tax return and property registration.

12

# What Happens After You Move In?

Your responsibilities don't end when you collect the keys.

- Notify utility providers and take opening meter readings.
- Arrange council tax or the applicable local property charge.
- Update your address with banks, insurers and relevant organisations.
- Check smoke alarms, carbon monoxide alarms and locks.
- Keep copies of the survey, guarantees, warranties, certificates and legal documents.
- Set aside money for regular maintenance and unexpected repairs.
- If you own a flat, understand your service charge arrangements and the building's management procedures.

13

# How Long Does Buying a Property Take?

The timescale depends on the location, the complexity of the transaction, mortgage approval, searches and whether there's a chain. The UK government's guide says a purchase in England and Wales takes around five months on average, although individual transactions can be quicker or considerably slower.

## A Typical Purchase, Stage by Stage.

**Preparation and Property Search**

Set your budget, arrange a mortgage agreement in principle and view properties.

**Offer Accepted**

Instruct your solicitor and begin the mortgage application, searches and survey.

**Legal Enquiries and Checks**

Resolve title issues, review the survey and satisfy lender requirements.

**Binding Agreement**

Exchange contracts in England and Wales, or conclude missives in Scotland.

**Completion and Moving Day**

Transfer the remaining funds, complete the purchase and collect the keys.

14

# Final Buyer's Checklist.

Use this checklist before you commit to your purchase.

## Your Purchase Readiness.

### 01 Finances

- [ ] I know my maximum affordable purchase price.
- [ ] I have budgeted for tax, legal fees, surveys and moving costs.
- [ ] I have a mortgage agreement in principle or confirmed funds.

### 02 Property

- [ ] I have checked the location and recent comparable sold prices.
- [ ] I have investigated the property's condition and arranged a suitable survey.
- [ ] I understand the tenure, boundaries and ongoing charges.
- [ ] I have checked relevant planning, environmental and insurance risks.

### 03 Legal Work

- [ ] I have instructed an independent solicitor or conveyancer.
- [ ] I understand the title, searches and contract terms.
- [ ] I have checked the completion funds and verified payment instructions.

### 04 Moving In

- [ ] My insurance and moving arrangements are ready.
- [ ] I have allowed for immediate repairs and ongoing maintenance.
- [ ] I know what needs to be arranged after completion.

**Call 01777 566400 for more information.**