

GOING UNDERGROUND



Why choose a basement

Over the past 10 years, house prices have spiralled out of control and the next step up the property ladder has been hard to reach for many families who simply want that extra bit of space for growing children or a 'chill out' zone for themselves.

Those who do decide to trade up and buy a bigger home not only have to shell out on the property itself, but also its associated costs of stamp duty, legal and agents fees, plus spend money on a Home Information Pack for the house being sold. On a £600,000 home, these costs equal around £50,000 – the starting price of a basement.

With land in short supply and recent announcements that loans will be harder to secure from 2008 onwards, why not make your money work harder and increase the floor space beneath your feet? In a two-storey property, a basement provides 50% more space (at a fraction of the cost of moving) and increases a home's value by 30%.

Basements are rapidly over-taking lofts as an ideal solution for homeowners who want to extend and increase the value of their property. There are rarely planning permission issues as a basement has little

visual impact on neighbours and that extra level will not have the 'sloping roof syndrome', commonly found in loft conversions.

Although lofts remain a popular choice for those essential additions, ie an extra study or bedroom, basements provide space for life's luxuries. Basements are no longer perceived as dingy, dark and cramped rooms, they've been replaced by an understanding of what they really offer – spacious, bright and warm conversions that look as if they've always been there, rather than an 'add-on'.

The increased space created by a basement is commonly used for a children's playroom, gym or snooker room or home entertainment centre – a clear indication that the conversion is not only an investment decision to enhance the value of a property, but a lifestyle improvement.



Can I have a basement in my home?

Not all newly-built homes lend themselves to a retro-fit basement, so check out your original property plans. If, for example, the house was built off of piled raft, it would make the construction of a basement a challenge. However, in the majority of cases, basements are suitable for most properties. Contact your local authority planning department to check what you're allowed to do – restrictions may be applied if you live in a listed building or conservation area.

You'll need to consider whether the highway is big enough to accommodate skips, following excavation. An average-sized 40 to 60 square metre basement conversion produces enough debris to fill 48 skips or 17 grab-lorry 'super-size' skips, so there has to be room for the skips and vehicle manoeuvre.

Planning regulations require a light-well as a means of escape and these are often in the front garden. Is the garden big enough for a light-well?

Next steps

Once you've decided upon this lifestyle improvement, a representative from Basements@Withers - a division of The Withers Group - will undertake a site visit, outlining costs for the preliminary work and also the build itself. Experts should be consulted to assess the structural weight calculation - ie identifying what's needed for underpinning and excavation. The existing building will need re-supporting and this type of calculation is best done by a structural engineer. We can organise this for you.

It takes around three months from initial enquiry to starting work on the basement and preliminary work

involves structural drawings, plans, calculations and architectural designs. Once everything is agreed, we confirm the configuration of the basement and submit planning applications, plus pre-audit information to validate the Defects Insurance Warranty. A planning decision usually comes back in around eight weeks.

The contract duration is generally six months from the start of the build to completion. Whilst the basement construction only takes three months, extra time is needed to complete the 'finishing-off' such as plastering, decorating, flooring, plus electrical and heating installations etc.



What else do I need to consider?

Services – check where the gas, electricity and water points are. They could be blocking access to the conversion and as a result will have to be relocated.

Ground floor – is it timber or concrete? Concrete makes the construction process more difficult. A ground-bearing concrete slab is supported by the ground beneath it and is therefore dependent upon the strength of the concrete and its formation. This may mean it has to be broken out and if this is the case, it could disrupt the room above. This is very rare, but it can happen. Once the underpinning works have been completed, a new timber floor can be constructed. However, there may be a period in-between when alternative accommodation has to be found as the bottom half of the house may be unusable whilst the process is underway.

Stair-well location – the most popular choice is to lead down from the hallway under-stairs cupboard. But, if there isn't a clear head height of two metres where you access these new stairs, it will not be allowed by the planners. The second most common access point is at the rear of the existing staircase, usually where there's a kitchen wall. So if you're serious about a basement, consider it before that new kitchen.

Party Wall Act 1996 – if you're excavating within three to six metres of a 45 degree line between your property and the bottom of your neighbour's wall, you will need to serve them with a Party Wall Notice. This provides the neighbouring property with a Schedule of Condition so if movement does occur as a result of excavation, it can be easily identified and rectified.

Planning, costs and communication – be clear what you want from your extra space, be aware of all costs and set aside a contingency sum (usually around 10%) and speak with your neighbours to let them know what's going on. Neighbours will be disturbed and the removal of the spoil is similar in noise to when the road is being dug up by the utility services. Although we use the latest compressed air equipment, there will be some airborne noise and vibration.

Access – if you have a driveway it will need to be used by us to accommodate skips, plant and equipment etc.

And finally, you will be able to live in your house whilst the work's being carried out, but be mindful that constructing a basement can be noisy and dusty. However, the end result is worth it!



Photo diary

To give you an idea of what's involved with a basement conversion, we've photographed the progress of one from start to finish.



First step is to turn an ordinary looking building site into something more in keeping with its surroundings by erecting hoardings.



A route is cleared into the basement area.



The excavated material is removed by conveyor for safety, speed and efficiency.



Pits are excavated to make ready for underpinning (installing the basement foundations).



Basement construction underway – concrete walls are reinforced to maintain the stability of the building.



With the reinforced walls concreted over, it's beginning to look more like a basement.



Waterproof membranes protect the property and pumps collect and disperse excess water run-off.



The biggest dilemma will be what to use the extra space for.



Lightwells create a more natural environment.

About



Basements@Withers is part of The Withers Group – a fourth generation family-run firm that has been in the building and underpinning (working below ground) business for over 195 years. Whilst believing in traditional family values such as respect and fair-play, it is also keen to modernise and meet challenges by embracing innovative, environmentally-friendly solutions.

The Withers Group has a reputation for attention to detail, sensible pricing and unrivalled service standards and its basement division is one of the UK's leading conversion companies.

It is a member of the Association of Underpinning Specialists (ASUC), a specialist trade body that only allows firms to join once they've demonstrated high levels of technical, financial and health & safety competency. Homeowners employing an ASUC member will receive a 12 year insurance-backed Defects Warranty on all works undertaken. Only ASUC members offer this Warranty – others provide just a Company Guarantee.

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Left to right; Richard, Anne and Rob Withers.

A job well done

Figures from the Department of Trade and Industry claim consumers are forking out around £1.5bn each year to rectify damage caused by dodgy builders. So how can you avoid falling victim to a rogue trader?

The Which? Develop Your Property Guide, recommends that homeowners;

1. Check out the qualifications of the contractor
2. Ask whether the firm is a member of a professional organisation, and if so, which one
3. Ask for a detailed quote, in writing, breaking down labour and material costs
4. Once the quote is accepted, agree in writing what work needs to be done and the timescales
5. Avoid dealing in cash – this is the preferred payment method of rogue traders
6. Request at least three references of recent work and visit the properties/speak with the homeowners
7. Consider using a firm that offers an insurance-backed Warranty for extra peace of mind.

Testimonials

"Delighted with the work – fantastic job. I would recommend Withers to everyone!" Mrs Verlaine, Kent.

"Your employees are a credit to your firm – professional and thoughtful." Mr and Mrs Dicker, East Sussex.

"Very pleased with the work." Mrs Wright, Kent.

"Thank you for the manner in which the work was carried out."
Mrs Joseph, Surrey.

"Thank you for the care and attention in completing the works to a very satisfactory standard." Mr Wellesley, Kent.

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