



Basementnet

## opening up the basement

Adam Doyle, Managing Director of Basementnet, shows you how to create a huge additional space

Where once lofts held the centre stage as the essential addition when extending a home, it is now the turn of the basement. Gone are the perceptions of dingy, dark, and cramped rooms. They've been replaced by an understanding of what a basement really offers: a spacious, bright and warm conversion that looks as if it's always been there, rather than an 'add-on'.

The most common reasons for wanting a basement conversion include making space for a children's playroom, a gym or snooker room, creating a home 'cinema' and music room, or housing a swimming pool.

So what do you need to consider before undertaking a project of this nature? 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 on a piled raft, it would make the construction of a basement a difficult challenge.

Make sure your road is big enough to accommodate the skips, following excavation. Bearing in mind that an average-sized 40 to 60 square metre basement conversion produces enough debris and muck to fill 48 skips or 17 grab-lorry 'super-size' skips, there has to be room for vehicle manoeuvre and space for the skips! Planning regulations require a light-well as a means of escape, and these are often in the front garden, so check it's big enough.

Contact your local authority planning department for advice on restrictions and what you're actually allowed to do. This is especially important if you live in a listed building or conservation area.

Basementnet outlines costs for the preliminary work and also the build itself at a site visit. Preliminary work involves structural drawings, plans, calculations and architectural designs. Once they're agreed, the configuration of the basement is sorted out, and planning applications submitted. A decision usually comes back in-around eight weeks. From here, the project takes six months.

There aren't many buildings that can't have a basement put under them, but to help things run smoothly, you would also need to assess 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 re-located.

Check whether your ground floor is 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.

Assess your stairwell 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.

The Party Wall Act 1996 says 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. If movement does occur as a result of excavation, it can be easily identified and rectified.

And finally, consult the experts when assessing the structural weight calculation - i.e. 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.



### do

- Thoroughly consider the costs. Prices range from £50,000 to £250,000.
- Be prepared for noise and disruption - underpinning and excavation works cannot be carried out quietly.
- Be clear what you want from your extra space.
- Instruct either a reputable basement or site investigation company to carry out a site investigation. At the very least, employ an architect and engineer to look after your interests.
- Employ a firm that offers an insurance-backed guarantee, rather than just a company guarantee.
- Speak with your neighbours - let them know what's going on.
- Have a contingency sum in place.

### don't

- Try to construct the basement yourself.
- Employ a gang of three men who have a van, whom you met in the pub.
- Be fooled by a company's façade, ask to see evidence of insurances, guarantees and customer testimonials.
- Make the decision to enter into a contract with a company based on price alone.
- Allow works to start until all details, both structurally and architecturally, are agreed and the statutory permissions have been granted.

*A basement conversion is an investment as well as a lifestyle improvement. In a two-storey property, a basement can provide 50% more space, and at a fraction of the amount you'd need to shell out to move. It's not surprising, therefore, that basements are becoming in vogue.*

*For further info call 020 8689 6205 or visit [www.basementnet.net](http://www.basementnet.net)*