

A checklist for buying a flat

✓ TICK CHECKBOX

Checklist: Questions to ask when buying a flat

As with any property purchase, there are lots of things to consider before you commit. You may question the practicality of being up one or more floors, whether you need a lift, what communal spaces there are the refurbishments you're allowed to make to your home. You'll also need to find out about things like leases, service charges and ground rent.

How long it left on the lease?	
Are there any restrictions on the property?	
How much is ground rent?	
Is there a service charge, and what does it cover?	
Is there a sinking or reserve fund for future repairs?	
Is there a management company?	
What happens if repairs or alterations are needed?	
Are there any major building works planned for the building or in the surrounding areas?	
Is the building compliant with fire safety regulations?	
How energy efficient is the flat?	
What fixtures are included, and when were they fitted?	
How much is council tax?	
What are transport links and local conveniences like?	

Why these questions matter when buying a flat

Buying a flat involves more than choosing a home you like, the details behind the purchase are just as important as the property itself. Each question highlights an area that could affect your budget, your ability to make changes to the property, or your long-term enjoyment of the space. The more you know upfront, the easier it is to avoid unexpected expenses and make a confident, informed decision.

How long is left on the lease?

With a leasehold property, you're effectively buying the right to live in that property for a set amount of time, which can be anything up to 999 years. As the time moves on and the lease changes hands, its value reduces. It's vital you know how long is left on the lease - this should be in the property listing, and your conveyancer will also check it for you. Mortgage lenders often require that properties have at least 80 or 70 years left on their lease. If you buy one with less than 80 years of lease remaining, you may find it challenging to sell in 5 to 10 years' time. Extending a lease can cost several thousand pounds and take many weeks to manage, so if the lease is running out, you should consider negotiating an extension before you buy.

Are there any restrictions on the property?

We'd advise asking your estate agent or seller if there are any specific restrictions that could significantly impact your lifestyle. For example, some flats may prohibit the ownership of pets, subletting, or restrict noise levels, such as not allowing music to be played after a certain time.

There can also be restrictions on modifications to the property such as removing carpets, knocking down internal walls or updating the windows and doors. Often, making alterations isn't as straightforward as it seems; you might need to secure written consent from the landlord or freeholder before proceeding with any significant works.

These types of restrictions are not always immediately apparent, so if you decide to purchase a flat it is advisable to have your conveyancer double check whether there are any such limitations that would prevent you from enjoying activities or making changes that are important to you.

How much is ground rent?

Ground rent is the regular payment a leaseholder makes to a freeholder for the right to occupy the property. It may be as little as £1 a year, but can be much more, and it's payable either annually, twice a year or quarterly. It can be fixed or escalating, which makes it one of the most crucial things to look out for when buying a flat. You don't want to get stuck with ground rent that increases by huge amounts, as this can become very expensive and cause you a headache if you want to sell your home.

Is there a service charge, and what does it cover?

Service charges are an essential aspect to consider when moving into a new property, as they can significantly impact your budget. These charges can cover anything from simple maintenance to gardening tasks, concierge services, and swimming pool upkeep. Service charges vary depending on the building and location. For standard flats outside London, they typically range from £1,000 to £3,000 per year. In high-end London developments, charges can reach £10,000 to £15,000, and in rare cases, even £20,000.

Knowing the details of these service charges helps ensure there are no surprises after you move in. Ask the property management for a detailed breakdown of the service charges and enquire how often these costs are reviewed and adjusted. This will give you a clear picture of the ongoing expenses and help budget accordingly.

Is there a sinking or reserve fund for future repairs?

It's worth checking if there's a sinking fund on the building you're interested in. This is a reserve fund that's been collected to cover any planned or unexpected works. The existence and status of such a fund can be necessary.

Why these questions matter buying a flat cont...

Is there a management company?

It's important to understand who you'll be interacting with regarding your flat, the building and the lease. You'll be dealing with these people regularly, paying service charges to them and asking them to fix any issues that arise. Therefore, knowing whether you'll be working directly with a professional management company or an individual landlord is essential. This knowledge will help you manage expectations and prepare for the type of communications and transactions you might expect throughout your time in the property.

What happens if repairs or alterations are needed?

Signing a lease (as part of your leasehold flat purchase) means you enter a contract that determines things like responsibility for maintenance issues, the fees payable to the freeholder and permission to make changes to your property.

Your service charge may not include the cost of major repairs, such as the roof, so find out before buying who would be responsible for such costs and how they'd be shared. There may also be restrictions on alterations - check with your solicitor what your lease allows.

Are there any major building works planned for the building or in the surrounding areas?

It's a good idea to check whether there are any planned repairs or works for the building the flat is in that you may need to pay towards after you've signed your lease. You won't be liable for any building works around your building, but the potential noise or travel disruptions from the construction are things to consider before putting pen to paper.

Is the building compliant with fire safety regulations?

Fire safety is essential when buying a flat, especially in larger or high-rise buildings. Ask if the building has passed all required fire safety checks and about any recommendations from recent inspections.

If the building has cladding, ask whether it has been reviewed, if remediation is required and who is responsible for paying for it. Your solicitor can confirm whether documents like an EWS1 form have been provided by the seller or freeholder and whether any upcoming safety works could lead to extra costs for leaseholders.

How energy efficient is the flat?

A flat's energy efficiency directly affects your monthly running costs, so it's worth reviewing the property's Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) and ask what factors contribute to its rating. Older buildings may have poorer insulation or outdated heating systems, which can increase utility bills.

Check the age and condition of key fixtures such as radiators, boilers, and appliances to understand whether upgrades may be needed.

What fixtures are included, and when were they fitted?

Fixtures and fittings can significantly influence the overall value and move-in readiness of the flat. Clarify exactly what is included in the sale, and ask when these items were last replaced or upgraded.

Knowing the age and condition of fixtures helps you anticipate future costs. If the fixtures are modern and well-maintained, they can save you money in the first few years of ownership. If they're older, you may need to budget for replacements soon after moving in.

Why these questions matter buying a flat cont...

How much is council tax?

Council tax varies depending on the band your property falls into, so it's important to factor this into your monthly budget. Each property is assigned a band (A-H in England) based on its assessed value, and the amount payable differs by local authority.

Typical council tax bands include:

- **Band A** - lowest
- **Band B**
- **Band C**
- **Band D** - average
- **Band E**
- **Band F**
- **Band G**
- **Band H** - highest

Your solicitor or estate agent can confirm the band, or you can check it online using the property's postcode.

What are transport links and local conveniences like?

A flat's location can shape your daily routine just as much as the property itself. Good transport connections make commuting easier, support long-term resale value and improve access to work, schools and essential services. It's worth checking how close you are to bus routes, train or tram stations and major roads, as well as the reliability and frequency of those services.

Local conveniences like nearby shops, green spaces, healthcare and leisure facilities can also make day-to-day living more practical and enjoyable. Understand how well-connected the area is helps you judge whether the location of the flat is for you now and in the future.