

THE LONG VIEWING

Ready to buy? Here's what to look out for before you make an offer, says *Graham Norwood*

Spring is seen as the best time of year to go – there's more choice after the winter dearth, sellers can show off gardens coming back to life, and houses, for the most part, look their best. Yet most of us spend less than a single hour viewing a home. This despite the fact that it's likely to be the biggest purchase we will ever make, tying us to a mortgage for decades, and may well be the place where we raise our children.

The consumer group Which? (which.co.uk) urges buyers to spend at least 20-30 minutes at a viewing. Even such minimal diligence is likely to pay off. Which? says 52% of buyers who spend less than 10 minutes at a property pay the asking price or above, but 71% of those who spend 90 minutes or more buy for below it.

"Don't be too British," urges Roarie Scarisbrick, a partner at the buying agency Property Vision, whose professional life is spent viewing homes for clients. "Time in the house is precious, so don't be shy about asking questions and opening cupboards, curtains and

windows. You can't give it back if you don't like it."

So, what strategy is best to spot problems, speed up a purchase and maximise your leverage over price? Here are the 10 golden rules.

1 Prep, prep, prep Don't just settle for looking at property portals: research the whole area. There's no substitute for getting over there yourself, but Google Maps and instantstreetview.com give details of immediate surroundings; streetcheck.co.uk has stats on local crime, jobs and facilities; and The

Sunday Times Parent Power guide is an invaluable tool for insights into the best state and independent schools in any area. Then hit the phone and email: ask the agent why the house is being sold (a rush sale gives buyers negotiating power), how long it has been on the market and whether its price has been reduced.

2 View before you view Do your own "drive-by" of the house at different times of day and night, either a couple of days before you have an official viewing or afterwards. This should reveal

whether bus-stop queues stare through the window, commuters use the road as a rat run or smokers from the local pub use the front garden as an ashtray. Check that there's a good mobile phone signal, too, and that the street lights stay on at night. Even if you are relaxed about shortcomings, remember that such problems could affect any future sale.

3 Prepare a checklist What practical things inside and out are key to you and each family member, including any pets? List them in order of priority so you can compare the

homes you view. If you're unsure what to include, the HomeOwners Alliance's website (hoa.org.uk) has a comprehensive list, including one precaution estate agents say is the most overlooked by buyers: measuring up to ensure furniture will fit.

4 Should the vendor be at the viewing? If you're purchasing one of the 5% of homes marketed in the UK by online agencies, it's likely that only the seller will be there; for the rest, you're the buyer, so you decide.



Experienced buying agents say the first viewing should be with the estate agent only – vendors can make viewers feel inhibited about asking trickier questions.

5 Start the viewing outside Check exterior brickwork and walls for cracks. Are the chimneys straight and the roof tiles all in place? Is there any obvious damp, and do the gutters and drains seem in good order? Review fences, hedges and, where relevant, the shared driveway – are boundaries and responsibilities clear between neighbours? You may not be an expert, but thorough viewing and questions now

can save abortive costs and heartache at survey stage.

6 The inside story You're over the threshold: now is not the time to be seduced by Jack Savoretti playing through the Sonos in each room. Which? has a 54-point guide to exactly what you should check, from the obvious (do the lights and taps work? Are window frames in good condition?) to those you might never think of on your own (is there a key for each window lock? What's the water pressure in the shower?). Pay attention

to smells in the home, too – you can sniff out damp issues. If there's too much air freshener for your liking, ask why. Spend several minutes going through your checklist in each room.

7 Be wise to the tricks of the trade Estate agents, house doctors and home staggers act for the seller, so it's down to you to see beyond first impressions. If the lights are already on in a room, turn them off so you

can check out the natural light. Ensure the furniture is normal-sized and not doll's-house small. If doors are open, make sure they close securely. Gently shift rugs, chairs and vases to look for damp or rotten woodwork. If the garden description is vague and sunlight is key, bring a compass (seriously).

8 Vital questions to ask about flats Apartments, whether purpose-built or converted, require additional investigation. Check the length of the lease, the size of communal areas (if you need to get bikes or buggies through), and the security of ground-floor or basement flats. "Ask about service charges and whether there's a sinking fund

– and, if so, how much is in it and how much you will be expected to contribute for future repairs," says Sara Ransom, London director of [Stacks Property Search](#). You don't want to be hit with a huge bill for repairing the roof or repainting the building straight after moving in.

9 Follow up in writing "After a viewing, I follow up straightaway with an email detailing points I'd like answers on," says Charlie Wells, managing director of Prime Purchase, the buying arm of Savills. "That's key if the person showing you round hasn't been able to answer all your questions on the spot."

10 Second and subsequent viewings Bring family members with you, and your architect or builder if you have renovation plans. Should you be planning big changes, it's often best not to let the seller know: many want their old home to remain

the same after they leave, and some will even accept lower offers from buyers promising to keep it as it is. It's a reminder, if we needed it, that buying a house is as much about emotion as money.

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