

Loft Conversion

Are you thinking of converting that unused attic space to extend your home?

If the answer to this question is 'Yes' then this note may help answer some of your questions.

- What will the room be used for?
- Will I need a new floor?
- How will I get to the new room?
- Do I want rooflights or windows fitted?

Loft conversions are generally carried out to provide:-

- An extra bedroom (maybe with en-suite)
- A playroom
- A study/office

If you intend to use the attic space to store light items such as suitcases and Christmas decorations then loose boarding is generally satisfactory. You must remember that the ceiling joists are intended to act as a fixing for the ceiling below and are not designed for heavy loads. To prevent any overloading of the ceiling joists it is recommended that the loose boarding does not cover more than 50% of the usable area.

Usable area is that part of the roof space with a headroom greater than 1.5m (approximately 4'6"). Access to this storage area is often by a retractable ladder. For any use other than light storage you will need to tell your Local Authority, Building Control Section who will advise you on procedures.

Why do I need to tell the Local Authority?

- They are responsible for the enforcement of the Building Regulations, which are made to ensure that the buildings are constructed or altered to reasonable standards. In the case of loft conversions the following are examples of those matters that you and/or your builder must consider.
- If the space is for a use other than light storage a new floor will have to be provided. New joists will have to be installed and these must be supported and kept clear of the existing ceiling; they are not allowed to rest on the existing ceiling joists.
- The existing foundations and lintels may need to be exposed to check they can carry additional loads. The floor and supporting structure may require the insertion of beams or steelwork to support the loft conversion. Structural calculations could be needed to justify the adequacy of these elements.
- The Building Regulations require floors and certain walls/doors to resist any fire for a specified period. In houses up to three storeys this is usually 30 minutes. If a fire was to occur in the house it is important that the occupants can escape safely therefore one escape window is a requirement on the first floor, 0.33m² (i.e. 450*730mm). The correct form of construction will protect you and your family.
- In addition to smoke detectors at every storey level, detectors should also be provided at half landing levels adjacent to habitable rooms. A heat detector should be provided in the kitchen and smoke detectors in all habitable rooms entered from the stair enclosure. All alarms should be mains powered with standby backup, interlinked so that detection of heat or smoke in one unit operates the alarm in all others. BS 5839:6 recommends optical smoke detectors in circulation areas with ionization detectors better for living and dining rooms. Optical may be better in bedrooms although either type would be considered acceptable.
- Panel doors in excess of 32mm thickness. The door should be attached to the door frame with steel hinges, not be visibly warped, fit well into its frame and there should be no visible defects particularly in the panels. Any existing glazing to doors or fanlights should be replaced with wired glass or similar fire resistant glazing to provide adequate resistance for integrity and stability. There should be no significant defects to adjacent walls or around door frames forming the stair enclosure.
- Existing Panel doors less than 32mm in thickness. In addition to the recommendations for panel doors in excess of 32mm indicated above, if it is intended to retain doors less than 32mm in thickness a proprietary solution should

be sought to upgrade the door. This may include the application of fire resistant materials to the panels and stiles on the room side of the door. Such doors can be provided with a certificate from a specialist supplier confirming their upgraded suitability. Alternatively, the door can be upgraded, on the room side, by infilling the panel with a fire resistant board and applying a similar board glued and screwed over the entire door.

- Existing hardboard or other lightweight flush doors are not considered adequate to provide a reasonable level of fire protection to a stair enclosure and should be replaced with FD 20 doors in accordance with the recommendations of the approved document.
- In order to prevent unpleasant living conditions, ventilation has to be provided to habitable rooms, bathrooms and kitchens. The regulations require either background (trickle) or rapid ventilation, or in certain circumstances, both.
- Condensation can also affect areas that cannot be seen such as roof spaces. If this is excessive and remains undetected it can cause problems. Ventilation must therefore be provided to roof spaces and in loft conversions this is particularly important.
- To gain access to your new room you will have to consider the type of stair you would like. Ideally you should provide a traditional type that will give safe and easy access. In the event of a fire the need to escape quickly is important.
- The walls and roof to the loft conversion must, in addition to keeping out the elements, also keep in the heat. They have to be constructed of materials that help reduce heat loss which can help keep heating costs down. As you may require planning permission, please contact the Planning Control Section on tel: 01665 511320.

General Information

The Party Wall Act 1996 may also apply if you intend to carry out work which involves:-

- work on an existing wall shared with another property.
- building on the boundary with another property.
- excavating near a neighbouring building.

You must determine whether the works fall within the scope of the Act, and where this is the case you must arrange to serve statutory notice on all those, defined by the Act as adjoining owners. You may wish to seek clarification through professional advice.

- Make a plan of what you want done. Don't be pressured into unnecessary work or work you can not afford. For large or complex jobs, professional advice may well be needed.
- Get the necessary consents or agreements from your local authority and insurance company. Discuss your plans with neighbours, particularly if there are party structures.
- Draw up a short list of firms that appear reliable, checking experiences of previous clients, and perhaps references from banks as appropriate.
- Find out whether a worthwhile guarantee is available giving cover against a contractor ceasing to trade. Insurance-backed schemes may be particularly appropriate.
- Warranties are available in partnership with Local Authority Building Control.
- Be as clear as possible about the way you will deal with any disputes.

The Building Employees Confederation (BEC) also offers advice to help you in 'Get the best from your builder'.

How and when do I tell the Local Authority?

Remember that the Local Authority is there to give advice. The Building Control Officer responsible for your area will be pleased to advise you on the procedures to follow:-

- If you decide upon a loft conversion (or any other type of building work) you need to tell the Local Authority by submitting the **Application for Building Regulations Approval form**, giving them either a) **Full Plans** application or b) **Building Notice**.
- If you choose the option of providing a Building Notice then you may be required to provide additional information with respect to specific elements of construction where the nature of the work may be complex or unusual (e.g. in the case of a loft conversion structural engineers calculations are often required for dormer roof and floor structures).

A delay in supplying supportive information can impede the progress of work on site. We strongly recommend that design solutions are agreed prior to commencement of work on site.

For further information contact:

Building Control at Alnwick District Council: Tel 01665 511320