

BUYER'S GUIDE TO A GREENER HOME

www.spongenet.org/buyersguide





Sponge is a network of young professionals who share an interest in sustainable development. Through our members and activities, Sponge aims to improve the sustainability of the built environment. The development of the Buyer's Guide to a Greener Home was co-funded by Defra with production funded by Communities and Local Government. Our thanks to sponsors Fulcrum Consulting and Drivers Jonas for their support.

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YOUR GUIDE TO A GREENER HOME



OLIVER HEATH,
TV PRESENTER AND DESIGNER

Buying a new home is one of the most stressful and expensive times in our life! However, it provides an ideal opportunity to ensure that your home will be a sound investment for the future and help you achieve a better quality of life.

This guide will give you the confidence and the knowledge to buy a greener, more sustainable, home. It outlines the key questions to ask the seller or estate agent to find out how the property will perform environmentally, socially and economically.

It also helps highlight improvements that might be needed in the future. You will better understand how sustainability features in a property can save you money, increase the value of your home and improve your lifestyle.

Take this guide house-hunting so you know what questions to ask and features to look for. Keep a note of the answers to help you make an informed final purchasing decision. Good luck!

Oliver Heath

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE



The guide is divided up into handy sections representing the different aspects of a home that influence its sustainability. Each section is colour coded and represented by an icon so you can navigate through the guide easily. The guide is structured in a simple question and

answer format, giving examples of features that improve sustainability. Questions provided will help you to ascertain how a property measures up against these ideal examples. There are hints and tips throughout to help you with your decisions.

Look out for the 'Top Ten Questions' at the back of the guide, providing a handy summary of key things you should ask. These form a good checklist and a quick overview of a property's sustainability. If the answer is yes to more than half of the questions, the property is on its way to becoming a sustainable home.

If you would like to know more about anything mentioned in this guide, please visit our website at: www.spongenet.org/buyersguide

SUSTAINABILITY...



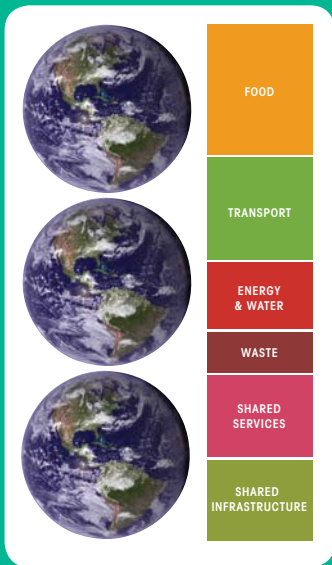
IMAGE BY ANTHONY COLEMAN

Quay House: A property made using recycled materials

A sustainable home is one that meets your needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

A sustainable home encourages a lifestyle that has minimal impact on the environment, and at the same time allows its inhabitants to enjoy life.

... IN YOUR HOME AND LIFESTYLE



Bioregional (One Planet Living) breakdown of typical UK lifestyle

In the UK, most of us use more than our fair share of the Earth's resources.

If everybody in the world lived as we do, we would need three planets to support us.

Living sustainably helps to ensure there is enough for all of us to share in the future.

How a home was built and how it is run will impact on its sustainability. Location is key, particularly access to public transport and community links, as these cannot be changed after you move in. You can put in place many measures after you have purchased the property, such as improvement to energy and water efficiency. Since 2002 homes have been built to increasingly strict energy efficiency standards and are more likely to include certain sustainability features than older properties.

GREEN RATINGS EXPLAINED



CODE FOR SUSTAINABLE HOMES

The Government has introduced a requirement for all new homes to have a rating against the Code for Sustainable Homes (the Code).

The Code is the national standard for the sustainable design and construction of new homes. The Code uses a 1 to 6 star rating system to communicate the overall sustainability performance of a new home. Each Code level has minimum energy and water efficiencies.

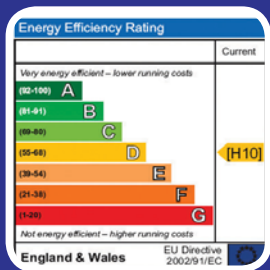
Since May 2008, all new homes are required to have a Code rating. Where a home has been assessed against the Code, a Code certificate must be included in the Home Information Pack (HIP). If the home is not assessed against the Code, the HIP must include a nil-rated certificate.

TIP If you are thinking of buying a recently built home, find out if it has a Code rating.

HOME INFORMATION PACKS

A HIP is a set of documents providing important information about a property, including energy and sustainability performance, and environmental assessments or flood risk searches.

TIP HIP's are now required for all homes put on the market.



ENERGY PERFORMANCE CERTIFICATES

An Energy Performance Certificate (EPC) is a bit like an energy label on a fridge. It gives you an A-G rating for a home's energy efficiency.

The EPC rating is based on factors such as the property's age, property layout, construction, heating, lighting and insulation.

An accompanying report also advises you on cost-effective improvements that could make the home more energy efficient.

It is mandatory to have an EPC for homes marketed for sale. By 2009 all buildings for sale or for rent, whenever built, will require a certificate.

Energy Performance Certificates (EPC's) are being introduced to encourage improved energy efficiency in buildings and cut carbon emissions.

TIP Find out if the property has a good energy performance rating.

The average property in the UK has a band D-E energy efficiency rating.

ENERGY



IMAGE SUPPLIED BY CEN
Solar panel generating electricity
from the sun

Using grid electricity and gas releases carbon dioxide (CO₂) into the atmosphere. CO₂ is a harmful greenhouse gas and a major contributor to climate change.

Buying a home with built-in energy efficiency measures makes it easier for you to save energy and money.

**Turning your thermostat down
by one degree can save £30
a year in heating costs.**

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ENERGY EFFICIENT TECHNOLOGIES



Roof insulation

Q Are there good levels of insulation?

Well insulated walls and roofs and double/triple glazed windows will keep the cold out and reduce the need for heating. Insulation is usually fairly cheap to install but changing windows will be more expensive.

TIP Check to see if the property has cavity walls as these are cheaper to insulate than solid walls.

Q Is the home draught proof and air-tight?

Air-tightness helps prevent warm air escaping and cold air entering. Draught proofing improves air-tightness by filling gaps. Draught proofing is relatively cheap and easy to install.

TIP Grants are available for draught proofing and insulating a property. Visit our website for more information.

Q How old is the boiler? Is it efficient at heating the home and water?

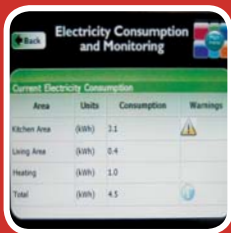
Modern boilers (2006 onwards) are required by law to be very efficient.

TIP Find out how soon the boiler may need replacing and the likely cost. A boiler will typically last 15 years.

Insulating a loft could save £110 a year on heating bills and nearly 1 tonne of CO₂ per year.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

MANAGING YOUR ENERGY USE



Measures in the home to help manage energy use can control how much is used and reduce what you spend on bills each year.

Q How much energy will the property consume?

Visible metering, such as 'smart meters' (as shown) demonstrate the amount of energy you are consuming. This helps you save money and understand the way your home uses energy.

Q Are user friendly controls provided for the heating system?

Thermostatic controls sense the temperature in a room and control the heating system to meet a set temperature.

TIP Ask if you can adjust heat in each room separately, so you won't waste energy and money heating a room not in use.

Q Are appliances A/A* rated?

White goods are a big energy user so it is worth finding out how efficient they are and when you may need to replace them. For new properties, ask if appliances are provided and what the energy rating is.

Q Is there space to dry washing?

This will save the cost of a tumble dryer and the electricity to run it.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

RENEWABLE ENERGY



Solar tubes on apartment block generating hot water

Renewable energy comes from sources that can be replenished, such as the sun. Renewable energy can be generated at the home, reducing the amount of energy required from fossil fuels.

Q Are there existing renewable energy technologies, such as solar panels, biomass boilers or wind turbines, incorporated into the property?

TIP Ask about maintenance requirements for the renewable energy system and whether you can sell any extra electricity back to the grid.

TIP Be wary of manufacturers' claims regarding the amount of energy you will get from renewables. Ask for 'measured performance information' that will give you a realistic idea of the amount of energy the system can generate.

Q Can renewable energy technologies be installed at the property?

Renewables have certain requirements to be effective, for example a south facing roof for solar panels. Ask if the property can accommodate the requirements.

TIP Grants are often available to help introduce renewables to your home.

TIP Consider switching to a green electricity supplier. Visit our website for more information.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

WATER



IMAGE SUPPLIED BY BRIGHTWATER
ENVIRONMENTAL LTD
Oxygenics Body Spa low-flow shower

A growing population, lifestyle choices and changing weather patterns mean that water shortages are becoming a very real threat in the UK.

It also takes a lot of energy to treat and transport water to your tap, in addition to energy associated with heating water for hot water use. There are many new and exciting technologies that can help save this precious resource.

40% of water used in the home is flushed down the loo!

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Are there water saving fittings in place to reduce water use?

Taps with aerators or spray nozzles, and showers designed for low-flow, can use around 50% less water to achieve the same effect as conventional showers and taps. Flow restrictors are cheap devices fitted onto pipework and stop more water than necessary flowing.



How much water do the toilets use?

Look out for dual flush toilets. Using a half flush when you don't need a full one saves water. Ask what size the cistern is and whether a water saving device such as a Save-a-flush or Hippo, has been fitted. Different types of devices are suitable for different sized cisterns.



Is there a water butt or rainwater recycling system at the property?

A water butt catches rainwater which you can use to water your plants or other outdoor water uses such as washing the car. A rainwater recycling system can use rainwater for toilet flushing, washing machines and outdoor uses. These measures reuse water that would otherwise be washed down the drain.



Is a greywater recycling system provided?

A greywater recycling system treats water from baths, showers and basins and reuses it for toilet flushing.



Will water bills be lower if water use is reduced?

Ask if there is a water meter and if you are charged for how much water is used, rather than a fixed price.

WASTE



Separating recyclables from waste

The things we throw away can be a valuable resource. Over 80% of our waste can be reused or recycled and a lot of it didn't even need to be created in the first place!

By recycling we can manufacture new and useful products, which means that less new materials need to be extracted or harvested. Most of our waste ends up buried in the ground in landfill sites where it produces around a third of the UK's total greenhouse gases.

Recycling just one plastic bottle saves enough energy to power a light bulb for six hours.

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Q Is there plenty of space in the property for separating and storing waste and recycling?

Q Is there a local recycling service that collects a good range of materials?

Recycling services vary from Council to Council. Ask what you can recycle, when it is collected and if you need a box or recycling sacks.

Q Is there a composting facility or a local food/garden waste collection?

Composting turns food and garden waste into a rich soil. It also avoids transporting the waste to landfill, where it produces methane, a greenhouse gas twenty times more damaging than carbon dioxide.

TIP If there is no composting facility, find out if the Council offers any discounted or free composters.

Q Where can I take re-usable or recyclable household items, such as TVs or bikes?

Find out if there are local charity shops or second hand stores that will take these items for reuse. Local community-based recycling schemes will often take items such as furniture, computers or mobile phones.

Q Is there a real nappy service operating in the area?

Disposable nappies take hundreds of years to break down. Real nappy services will collect, launder and deliver cloth nappies.

The UK will run out of space for landfill in five years time.

MATERIALS



IMAGE BY GREEN BUILDING STORE

A 100% FSC timber home, made with natural paints and materials

Every part of a building has a production chain associated with its manufacture – from raw material to a finished element in your home. This production chain will have an impact on your home's lifespan and ongoing running costs. It will also affect your health, the environment and other people's lives around the world.

Note that for older properties it is difficult to trace production chains, so information on materials may not be available.

Certified timber is a highly sustainable building material as it is renewable and almost carbon neutral.

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Are the materials used in the building durable?

Durable materials save you money on replacements and maintenance. They are often strong, high quality and long-lasting.

TIP Ask what is the expected lifespan of the roofing, windows, flooring, external surfaces, and if any materials are under warranty.

Are natural, non-toxic materials incorporated in the property?

Natural materials, such as lime plaster and organic paints are better for our health as they are not made from toxic materials. Ask what types of paints were used and whether they contain noxious chemicals, such as solvents, which release volatile organic compounds (VOC's).

Are materials ethically and environmentally sound?

Certifications, such as FSC for timber, can confirm environmentally responsible production of materials and fair wages for production workers. Ask if any material certifications are available.

TIP A high recycled content and local sourcing will reduce a material's environmental impact. Kitchen units and carpets can be made from recycled materials.

Green roofs are covered with soil and vegetation and provide a habitat for wildlife. They also reduce flood risk by absorbing rainfall.

TRANSPORT



By walking, riding a bike or using public transport you can benefit your health, the environment and save money. Choosing a home that gives you good access to public transport and reduces your need to travel is one of the most significant steps you can take towards living a more sustainable lifestyle.

Cycling is a highly sustainable form of transport – not only is it carbon neutral, it doesn't pollute the air locally and keeps you fit and healthy.

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Q Is there a shop within walking distance selling a good variety of fresh food and household goods?

Walking to the shops is a good way to get exercise and can be very convenient.

Q Is there a train, tram or underground station within walking distance? How frequent are services?

Q Is there a bus stop nearby?

Find out if the bus services go to a high street, shopping centre or station and how frequent they are.

Q Is there a community car club, or other car club facilities nearby?

Car clubs give you the convenience of a car when you need it without the hassle or cost of maintaining one.

Q Are there cycle paths and safe pedestrian routes nearby that provide good links to local amenities?

Check to see that there are places to safely store your bike.

Q Is there a space suitable for working from home?

Working from home, either some or all of the time, can save you valuable time and money.

A quarter of all journeys we make by car in the UK are for less than two miles.

HEALTHY LIVING



Part of a sustainable lifestyle is feeling good. Your home and the area around it can make a big difference to your health, comfort and well being.

A home that allows you to relax, spend time outdoors, and take more exercise will help you feel good and enjoy life.

In the UK, the food we eat has a bigger impact on the environment than all other activities.

www.spongenet.org/buyersguide

Q Does the property benefit from plenty of natural daylight?

Daylight can help reduce the need to switch on lights and is also good for your wellbeing.

Q How is fresh air brought into the property? Is there ventilation that can be controlled?

Modern homes are very air-tight so may require a fan-driven system to bring fresh air in when windows are closed. If there is a fan-driven system, ask if it recycles heat to save energy – known as 'heat recovery'.

Q Does the property have a recreational outdoor space close by?

Ask about traffic conditions on the roads around the property. This will indicate congestion and safety issues, as well as noise and pollution levels.

Q Are there allotments or community gardens nearby?

Allotments are a great way to get exercise, grow your own fresh food and a perfect place to use your own compost.

TIP Balconies or small gardens can be ideal for growing a few herbs and even some vegetables.

Q Is there a farmers' market or box delivery service selling locally-produced organic food?

Being able to buy food that has travelled fewer miles to reach your plate can significantly reduce your environmental impact.

LOCAL COMMUNITY



IMAGE SUPPLIED BY BARRATT HOMES
ECO-VILLAGE, SHORLEY

It is important to feel a part of your local community and get to know the people in your area. Knowing your local community well can help you feel safer and happier. Taking part in activities locally also reduces your need to travel.

An active community will be more vibrant, tolerant and prosperous, and is more likely to look after and support the needs of the people that live there.

A community hall is an ideal location for fetes, parties, activities and clubs.

Q Is there a local community centre?

Ask what sort of facilities they offer and how easy it is to access.

Q Is there a café or pub within easy walking distance?

This can be an ideal location to meet up with existing friends and get to know people in the community.

Q Where is the nearest GP, dentist or medical centre?

TIP Having a local GP or dentist within walking distance will make it much easier to join and more convenient.

Q Are there community groups and societies in the area?

Joining groups such as Neighbourhood Watch and local environmental groups is a great way of contributing to your local area.

TIP If you are moving into a block of flats find out if there is a Tenants and Residents Association. It will help you have a say in what goes on in your local estate.

Q Are there facilities offering activities for young people, such as a youth club or leisure centre?**Q Where are the nearest schools and places of worship?**

THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE



Whether we like it or not, our climate is changing. Think about how well your new home will cope with a changing climate.

Q Will the property be comfortable inside during periods of extreme warmth and cold?

Ask if rooms can be easily ventilated to keep them comfortable on hot days. Check levels of insulation and draught proofing for protection from the cold.

TIP Heavyweight materials, such as bricks and concrete, have good thermal mass, which helps stop the home heating up or cooling down too quickly.

Q Is the property in a low flood risk area?

Find out if there are flood defences in place and how the risk of flooding has been managed or reduced. Flood risk will affect your cost of insurance or insurability.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

INFORMATION TO HELP RUN YOUR HOME



IMAGE SUPPLIED BY GREEN BUILDING STORE
New Ecoplus System windows

If washing machines come with instruction manuals, then why don't houses? Make sure you ask for as much useful information as you can to help you operate your new purchase effectively and efficiently.

Q Is an easy to understand information pack available to help you run your home?

How you run your home is a vital part of making it sustainable. Ask if there are clear instructions for your heating controls and, manuals for any domestic appliances or renewable energy systems.

Q Is a maintenance helpline number and basic maintenance information provided for all technology installations?

Find out if there is any information on day-to-day maintenance, including maintenance helplines, for any boilers, renewable energy installations or water recycling systems. Check our website for more information on how to run your home.

QUESTIONS TO ASK

TOP 10 QUESTIONS



1 Does the property have a good energy performance rating?



2 Can renewable energy technologies be installed on the property?



3 Are there water saving fittings in place to reduce water use?



4 Is there a local recycling service that collects a good range of materials?



5 Are natural, non-toxic materials incorporated in the property?



6 Is there a shop within walking distance selling a good variety of fresh food and household goods?



7 Does the property benefit from plenty of natural daylight?



8 Does the property have a recreational outdoor space close by?

9 Is there a café or pub within walking distance?

10 Is the property located in a low flood risk area?

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