

MAINTENANCE AND REPAIR OF YOUR PROPERTY

– ADVICE FOR HOMEOWNERS

For most people their house is the biggest investment they make. Timely repairs and maintenance are very important in preserving the property and hopefully preventing major costs and problems that can be avoided.

Improvements are also an investment producing a better place to live and very often increase the value of a property.

The outside of the house is critical in keeping out the worst of the weather and a systematic check of the following is suggested :-

1. Roof and Gutters

Check for slipped or broken tiles or slates, missing pointing (cement) around ridge tiles. Using binoculars or a telescope makes it easier, but in any case it is safest to inspect the roof from ground level.

Look at the flashings (usually grey/silver and made of lead or zinc); these are around the bottom of chimneys and should be tucked neatly into the chimney. Compare the look of your roof with those of neighbouring properties. Look at the chimneypots; are they straight and is any of the pointing on the chimneys or around the pots cracked or pieces missing.

Look at the gutters, is there debris hanging over the edges, are the walls stained greenish or whitish near to the gutters (possible leak). Are any of the brackets that should hold up the guttering missing. Are the boards that hold up the guttering and other external woodwork in good condition or are there pieces missing or rotted. Do they need painting?

You can also in many houses check the condition of the roof from your loft area. Look for signs of any woodworm (small holes in the roof timbers) or any evidence of wet timber and fungal growth (fluffy white or brown thread like appearance on timber surface).

For flat roofs, does anything look different from normal, are there puddles, bulges, cracked felt or dips in the roof. If you choose to walk out onto a flat roof, it is best to do so when the roof is cold to reduce the chance of any chippings on the roof puncturing the surface. It is advisable to use a board to stand on to help distribute your weight.

For most roofing defects you will need to employ a roofing company and estimates from several such companies will help you to decide what works are essential and who you should employ to do the works.

2. Walls

If your property has a brick exterior, is the pointing (cement joints) in good condition or are bits missing. Are there damp patches inside the house corresponding to the areas of missing pointing.

Are there damp patches inside the house at low level – check if possible the ground level outside the house, has this been raised by flower beds, patios etc. If it has been raised, then this could have breached the house damp-proof course, it could also be as a result of condensation, blocked drainage or penetrating damp as a result of a rainwater pipe defect or other water pipes. It would be prudent to have specialist companies investigate the cause of dampness and compare their findings before acting.

If your property is rendered, missing or bulged rendering will need to be made good.

Have any cracks appeared inside or outside the property, have they damaged decorations and are the cracks getting bigger.

Structural problems of a more serious nature eg subsidence, severe cracks in external walls, gradually widening cracks, should be reported to the Building Insurers.

Homeowners with no Building Insurance cover should seek the advice of a Structural Building Engineer/Surveyor. (Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) can give a list of local members: Tel: 0207 222 7000).

3. Drains

If you are able, lift any manhole covers on your property and check that they are clear of sewage and silt and are running freely. Any debris or damage should be removed or repaired and any blockage should be dealt with. (Thames Water Authority may be responsible for clearing any blockages where your property was built before 1937 and drainage is shared with one or more other properties Tel: 08459 200 800).

4. Doors and Windows

Do they open and close easily and are they reasonably draughtproofed. Is there any rotten timber to replace or painting to undertake. Where timber windows are in very poor condition, replacement may be the cheapest option.

From April 1st 2002 the glazing used in replacement windows has to meet Building Regulations and the contractor has to be a member of FENSA (Fenestration Self – assessment Scheme).

5. Electrical Rewiring

You can visually check substandard electrical wiring e.g is it fabric covered, have you got switches with round plug holes, do your plugs get hot when in use, do you have sufficient number of plugs without using lots of adapters or extension leads, do fuses blow frequently ?

Do not touch bare wires or loose switches or damaged plugs. Get a competent electrician to examine the wiring in your house and remember to switch off electrical circuits at the mains before examining or altering the electrical system.

6.Plumbing and Heating

Water can cause serious decay or damage to your property. Common plumbing defects include dripping taps, leaking pipes and joints should be fixed as soon as possible. Home owners can reduce the risk of burst pipes by ensuring that all pipes that are exposed to external temperatures are properly lagged including pipes in the roof space. Central heating systems and hot water boilers should be regularly serviced to reduce the likelihood of a failure of the system.

7. Assistance from Merton Council and others

Contact London Borough of Merton , Environmental Health Section Tel: 0208 545 3025, for general information on housing repairs and maintenance.

Grant assistance of up to £3000 may be available from London Borough of Merton towards essential repairs to property. For further details of Merton Council's grant eligibility criteria please ring 0208 545 3025.

You can also contact Care & Repair, Merton, for general information and assistance if you are over 60 or disabled on 0208 648 0471

For information and details with regard to Equity Release Schemes for people over 60 years of age or under 60 who are disabled please ring "Houseproud" on 0800 783 7569 or Merton Council on 020 8545 3025.

8. Useful sources of information:

The National Home Improvement Council is an excellent source of information and advice with regard to maintaining and improving your property. Their website can be viewed at www.nhic.org.uk (Free internet access is available in local libraries) and they can also be contacted at

National Home Improvement Council
Carlyle House, 235 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 1EJ
Tel: 0207 828 8230 Fax: 0207 828 0667
Email: info@nhic.org.uk

Trade organisations, Government Research Facilities, Building Product Manufacturers, Local Libraries and Local Authorities can provide a lot of information regarding identifying building problems and sourcing remedial measures.

It is advisable to contact as many places as possible to obtain leaflets and guidance notes prior to starting any repair/replacement works.

Some other useful contacts include:

For Roofing advice:

The National Federation Of Roofing Contractors Ltd

Tel: 0207 436 0387 Website : www.nfrc.co.uk

For Flat Roofs:

Flat Roofing Alliance

Tel: 01444 440027 Website: www.fra.org.uk

For Electrical works :

National Inspection Council For Electrical Installation (NICEIC)

Tel: 0207 582 7746

Fax: 0207 820 0831

For Plumbing works :

Institute Of Plumbing (IP)

Tel: 01708 472791

Fax : 01708 448987

Websites : www.plumbers.org.uk
www.registeredplumber.com

Council Of Registered Gas Installer (CORGI)

Tel : 01256 372300

For advice or obtaining a list of local Builders:

The Federation of Master Builders

Tel: London Region 0207 242 7583

For Double Glazing Window and FENSA (Fenestration Self-Assessment Scheme) queries:

Glass and Glazing Federation (GGF)

Tel : 0207 403 7177 Website : www.ggf.org.uk

If you are having Central Heating, glazing work or major works eg. Roof replacement done on your home, a way of ensuring the work has been done in compliance with the Building Regulations is to ask the contractor for one of the following :

- Benchmark Certificate for Central Heating
- Certificate from FENSA
- A completion certificate from the Local Authority Building Control Department (Telephone 020 8545 3123 or 3145)

For Underground Drainage Problems :

For shared drainage built prior to 1937 contact Thames Water Authority (Tel 08459 200 800)

If the underground drainage in your property is known to be your responsibility (i.e drainage built after 1937 or not shared with one or more properties) then you are liable to fix the defect.

Some Local Water Supply Authorities operates breakdown insurance schemes for unforeseen drainage and internal plumbing defects. Building Insurances also provide some cover for underground drainage defects, check individual policy conditions.
Thames Water Authority Tel: 0800 783 3344

For Damp Proofing and Timber Treatment advice ;

British Wood Preserving and damp Proofing Association
Tel: 01332 225100
Fax: 01332 225101
Email : info@bwpda.co.uk

Damp proofing or Timber treatment works always choose a contractor who is a member of BWPDA and willing to give a long term guarantee.
Leaflets and guidance notes are also available from manufacturers of Damp Proofing and Timber Treatment products.

9. Tips if you need to employ a builder

1. Try to get personal recommendations from friends or neighbours and always get the builders name and address and verify their details are correct. Do not use a builder who only offers a telephone number.
2. Always get as many quotes as you can and make sure that they are in writing and clearly set out what work will be undertaken.
3. Ask the builder for references from other people who have had work done and ask those people for their comments on quality, tidiness and reliability of the builder.
4. Try to use a builder that belongs to a recognised trade association. Some builders may continue to use the logo of such an association after membership has expired, so check with the association concerned
5. Once you have selected a builder get them to confirm all of the details of the transaction in writing including a full breakdown of all costs, labour, materials, VAT etc as well as a start and completion date. Without a written date of completion, it can be difficult to make a claim where works take much longer than you anticipated.
6. If a deposit is required try to pay as little as possible up front and make any payment by credit card if you can. As long as over £100 of the cost is paid by credit card, then the credit card company shares responsibility with the builder, should things go wrong. Do not pay in advance for works to be undertaken other than for materials that are delivered to your property
7. If a builder offers a guarantee or warranty on their work, always get it confirmed in writing and check exactly what it covers. Guarantees of 20 or 30 years may look appealing but in practice they may only operate for as long as the builder is in business. A number of builders will offer insurance backed guarantees and it will be prudent to check with the companies offering these guarantees for details of the scheme.

In the event of a dispute with your contractor try to resolve it amicably, possibly reaching a compromise. Unfortunately whatever precautions are taken sometimes problems do occur. Legislation exists to protect consumers in these situations. The Supply of Goods and Services Act 1982 says that any work carried out by a builder must be completed:

- with reasonable care and skill
- within a reasonable period of time
- for a reasonable charge (unless the cost is agreed beforehand).

If you do need to complain to a builder it is best to do it in writing via a recorded delivery letter. Further general advice can be sought via the Consumer Advice line at Merton Civic Centre. Telephone 020 8545 3026.