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Building Control



• basement living • part of the peace process • fire safety •



Sometimes the only

Anyone who is fortunate enough to own a home in Westminster can congratulate themselves on having a property in what is arguably the most expensive area in the country. But what happens when the homeowner feels the property is no longer big enough?

There are a number of options such as moving to a larger property, which is an expensive, unsettling (and traumatic) experience and there's not a lot of free land available in Westminster. A loft or side extension could be another possibility (provided the property isn't listed, and you can cope with the associated objections from the neighbours). As planning policies resist overdevelopment anyway, many applications are turned down and subsequently go to appeal, further delaying the process.

This could explain why there has been an exponential growth in the market for basement conversions, which often do not need planning permission. Permission is still required when forming lightwells and creating new habitable space outside the existing building's envelope, and the neighbours may complain about the upheaval (there is significant excavation work, involving delving some 3m deep, and numerous lorries are obviously needed to remove the soil). Make no mistake: even before fitout, forming the basement is a slow process, which can take more than four months.

But the fact remains basement conversions are an increasingly popular method of extending a property. Because London homes lack sufficient living space, they provide a new floor level providing multiple rooms that can be used for a variety of purposes, including leisure space, a media room, nanny's suite, wine storage or utility rooms.

When I first started advising on the structural aspects of basement conversions for the council's Planning Department, there were about 60 requests a year – Westminster Council now deals with 30 requests a month. I became involved because of my structural engineering background. Excavation beneath or alongside existing buildings is fraught with problems if it isn't carried out safely and is one of the highest-risk building operations. Before an application can be

progressed, the Planning Department needs a method statement from either a civil or structural engineer to show that the scheme is viable structurally.

There have been instances of builders trying to take out too much soil in one go – once this led to structural cracks which could ultimately have resulted in collapse. On another occasion, there was a slight collapse, with the contractors getting out of the trench just in time. You can't cut corners on projects like this – Westminster has soil of a sandy, gravelly consistency that must be supported as works progress. Failure to do so is dangerous, causing subsidence both to the individual property and neighbouring homes. It should be noted that these problems have occurred when a builder has been employed instead of a basement specialist.

Then there is the question of removing the soil. On 11 October 2010, the *London Evening Standard* (www.thisislondon.co.uk) carried a report which related how a skip fell through the road into a storage vault, fracturing a number of water pipes. It made a good story, but could have been tragic had it occurred while the contractors were working rather than at 3am the next day. But notwithstanding this incident and the other near disasters, as long as everyone in the construction team follows the correct procedures, I remain confident and reasonably relaxed about basement conversions. The role of both the Planning and Building Control Departments is to reduce the element of risk and ensure that the contractor is following the structural engineer's design in a methodical, unrushed manner. Parts A (Structure), B (Fire safety) and F (Ventilation) are probably the most significant concerns from the building control viewpoint. There has to be a protected (not open-plan) staircase and mechanical ventilation (the air-conditioning plant can't be external in residential areas). Neither damp proofing nor shifting water tables (given the composition of Westminster's soil) are as much of an issue as some believe.

There are some excellent basement conversion companies around, such as London Basement. Formed from a building and development company in 1994, it specialises in cellar and basement waterproofing works, including small cellar and under-pavement vault conversions.



way is down

Maggie Smith, Marketing Manager, says: "In response to increasing numbers of enquiries from people wanting to extend cellars to create good living space with suitable head height, the company employed architects, engineers and structural underpinning/ground working teams. Initially working on areas of approximately 350-400 square feet, it has pioneered many methods of basement construction, including working safely below solid floors. We have constructed basements from 300-3,000 square feet, below houses, patios and gardens. An existing cellar is not necessary. We've now completed over 1,000 such conversions."

She adds: "There are actually very few issues with building control, because we know what is required and provide the necessary information to the district surveyors. Our site inspections go through without any problems, because our highly trained structural teams work within strict company guidelines."

Because the organisation offers a complete design and build service it has complete control. There is a dedicated team headed up by a foreman on each site, and its underpinners have to be qualified to a specially created NVQ standard. And fans of subterranean living will be delighted to know that, dependent on ground conditions and location of property, it is possible to create a basement of more than one level.

The basement ceiling height can be as high as required (8 feet is considered a minimum comfortable ceiling height), although this will affect the cost. Most clients remain in their homes during their basement conversion. The front garden (where the window and lightwell will be) is excavated then a secure covered hoarding is constructed around the area. This opening is used for access throughout the works.

Homeowners do need to tell their neighbours about the proposed basement construction, as Party Wall Awards are generally required. The basement construction can be continued (ground conditions allowing) beyond the footprint of the house, e.g. below front or rear gardens, including paved driveways.

Structural works are covered by a 12-year latent defect insurance-backed guarantee, there is a 10-year guarantee for the waterproofing



works and a 30-year guarantee for the cavity drain membrane waterproofing system.

It has to be said that basement conversions are neither cheap nor quick. Prices range from £100,000-1m, dependent upon the size of project and the opulence of the fitout, and you're looking at a total completion period of around four-12 months. But they maximise the potential of, and add huge value to, an apartment or house. In fact, prospective homebuyers often ask Maggie Smith whether a basement conversion is possible on the property they are considering buying.

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Further information
www.londonbasement.co.uk

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