

*This guidance note has been issued by McCluskey Chartered Surveyors. The purpose of this document is to provide guidance to those who are looking to purchase a property in the UK. This document should not be considered in isolation and aims to offer an overview into property defects. Readers are advised to employ the services of a Chartered Surveyor when purchasing a property.*

## The top three property defects

### Introduction

This guidance note is designed to assist anyone purchasing or selling residential property. It aims to support individuals to identify potential defects during the viewing process. These tips aim to offer greater insight into the structural elements of a property, and whether there are any potential risks, or legal implications. We would always recommend having a survey when purchasing a property as there are often hidden defects which a qualified surveyor will be more attuned to. However, armed with this knowledge, you should be able to make an informed decision on how best to proceed.

#### 1. Structural movement – look out for:

- Stepped/diagonal cracking, especially where the crack is wider at one end. If identified, look for corresponding cracking externally/internally.
- Vertical hairline cracks can typically be attributed to thermal expansion and contraction and can be easily filled and decorated.
- Horizontal hairline cracks should be treated with caution, especially in cavity walls as this could be a sign of cavity wall tie failure.
- Walls which are out of plumb, i.e. leaning, as this could be an indicator of roof spread.
- Bulges in the walls could be a sign of lateral restraint failure or overloading.
- Undulations in the roof line, including dipped or uneven tiles.
- Uneven floor levels. You can undertake a simple heel drop test to check for excessive bounce.

#### 2. Damp - the most common forms of damp are condensation, penetrating, and rising damp:

- Condensation - look for drip marks and black spot mould, especially at high and low levels in the corner of rooms, and around window and external door openings.
- Penetrating damp – look for brown staining, friable/loose plaster and blistering/peeling paint. The pattern can be random depending on the cause.
- Rising damp – look for brown staining forming a tide mark on the walls. This is usually at low level, up to 1.2m high. Blistering/peeling paint and friable/loose materials may also be present.

The most common signs of timber deterioration as a result of damp are wood boring insect, cuboidal cracking, and a fibrous consistency:

- Wood boring insects – look for multiple holes in exposed timber, approximately 1-4mm in diameter. If the infestation is active, there may be signs of frass/dust on or below the timbers. Infestations may be historic so you should ask if it has been treated.
- Cuboidal cracking – simply, cracks in the form of cubes on the surface of the timber. Typically, this is caused by fungal growth (dry rot).
- Fibrous consistency – visually, this is your typical timber rot. Typically, it is caused by fungal growth (wet rot).

NB: All timber deterioration is likely the cause of damp. Treating the timber deterioration without resolving the cause will be ineffective.

### 3. **Safety** - the primary areas of concerns are access, means of escape, and materials:

Access – look out for the following, with particular reference to staircases and raised areas:

- Lack of handrails, or low handrail heights (below 900mm).
- Lack of vertical spindles/balustrades, or spindles which are too far apart (more than 100mm).
- The pitch of stairs/steps should not be too steep (max. 42°), and they should feel safe to walk up and down. Consider the depth and width of treads/risers (max. rise 220mm, min. tread 220mm).

Means of escape – this ensures the safety of occupants in the event of an emergency:

- Ensure all windows and doors are operational, keys are available and kept close by.
- Window openings should be large enough to escape through and allow a fire fighter through with their equipment (min. 450 x 750mm).
- Ground floor windows should be a safe height above external ground level (max. 800mm). Where lower than 800mm, the glazing should be toughened.
- Window openings at first floor level and above should have restrictors fitted.
- Any windows above 4.5m from external ground level should not be included in your escape plan. First floor windows under 4.5m from ground should be fitted with restrictors that enable emergency escape.
- A property with three floors or more (such as a two-storey house with loft conversion) should have a protected staircase to allow for safe escape in the event of a fire.

Materials – there are a number of materials which may be hazardous, namely:

- Asbestos – may be found in properties built before 2000. It is commonly found in ceiling and wall panelling and Artex finishes, pipe insulation, corrugated roof sheets i.e. garages, and in tile adhesive and grout. If asbestos is suspected, it should be tested by an asbestos surveyor.
- Glazing – single glazing which has not been toughened can cause significant injury if broken. This may be evident in windows, internal doors, and shower screens. Look out for a British Standard (BS) stamp on the glass to indicate if it is toughened.

**For more information, visit our website for the complete series of Guidance Notes.**

*Please be reminded that this information aims to provide an overview of some of the defects to look out for when viewing a property. This list is by no means exhausted and the information provided herein is not to be relied upon in the absence of a survey. A Chartered Surveyor should be employed when purchasing a property.*

