

Considering an Attic Conversion?

With uncertainty in the Irish market for new homes, many homeowners are considering improving their existing property as an alternative to moving. This article outlines some of the main issues to be considered.

Firstly

Planned and built correctly, a good attic conversion gives a generous brightly-lit space, an extra floor for your home, but you could also get a great return on your investment when you sell, as it can add up to 20% to the value of your home.

Compared to outside extensions, attic conversions are cleaner and quicker to complete and usually there is not too much disruption from builders until they break through to build the new stairs.

Some practical considerations

Not all attics are suitable for or worth converting. A simple way to check is to see whether you can stand upright in your loft at its highest point, as this needs to be at least 2.3m. Even if you can stand up, a dormer window extension will maximise headroom throughout the space.

Take care if you need to drastically reduce an existing bedroom or landing space to put in the permanent stairs, a must-have if you want the new room to be classified as 'habitable accommodation'. In many cases attic conversions are exempt from planning as the ceilings are not high enough to qualify as 'habitable accommodation'. However, in practice these conversions are regularly used as bedrooms or guest rooms.

If you want to use the room as 'habitable space' you will need planning permission and the cost to ensure the works comply will increase. You also need permission if you want to put in a roof window in the front of your house or you want to add a dormer window. Windows should be at least 10% of the new room's floor area but you will create a much better space if you increase this to 20%. Make sure to use only a reputable

company specialising in attic conversions as the cost to repair shoddy work is substantial. Also be prepared for some disruption in your home. A standard attic conversion will take four to six weeks, but can often be done in a much shorter time depending on the house type and age.

Know what you want

Doing an attic conversion is not a minor project, and it needs the same amount of planning as an extension. It is recommended that you get architectural plans drawn up. Make sure you know what you want so that you can brief your architect. Are you considering more than one room? Do you want to include a bathroom and if so are you content with a shower or do you need enough space for a bath? What are the rooms to be used for? Have you thought about storage space (that sloping roof must be taken into account)? Think about electrical, television and computer connection requirements. And, finally, you will need to consider heating and waste issues if you are going to put in that bathroom or shower.

Selecting your builder

It is essential to find a professional builder to convert your attic, making sure that they are experienced in loft conversion work.

In selecting your builder, ask how they will access the attic for the early stages of the work. A good builder will erect scaffolding and bring in all structural materials through the roof. By the time they cut the stairwell out and install the staircase, the new room will be structurally complete and ready to be plastered. Some builder may cut costs by taking everything through the house, but this can cause a lot of understandable annoyance and possible damage.

Get three quotes! This will give you a better idea as to which builder offers best value for money. But also remember that cost and value is not the same thing. Check out the builder, look at previous work and talk to past clients to find out if they were happy with the quality of their jobs and the way in which they were carried out.

Always use a contract

Try to select a builder who will agree to a contract with an agreed timetable that both parties are happy with. A contract is a 100% necessity on every job to prevent misunderstandings. You can always revert back to the contract to ensure that you and the builder are in no doubt about what has been agreed to. [A standard Law Society Contract can be obtained from The Irish Home Builders Association at a cost of €2.00. Email to ihba@cif.ie].

Legal stuff = Planning Permission

It is also important that you are aware of all the legal requirements that you must fulfil when having improvement works done. This is not up to the builder, unless you specifically ask him to do it. The attic conversion may require planning permission; therefore it is important that you contact your local authority for advice as to whether planning permission is required.

Working with your builder

No matter how well you do the planning and preparations, there will always be some problems with each building project. However, if you are realistic, most of the problems can be overcome very easily. Builders are not mind readers, so if your project is not going to plan, you must spell it out and explain exactly what you want. Therefore, it is important that you talk to the project manager on the job to ensure that there is absolutely no confusion and that everyone is aware as to what you really want.

Finally, if you have personal requirements, such as no radios or no smoking in the house, or you would rather not share your toilet or kitchen facilities, make sure that these are known before the job begins. However, bear in mind that having happy

workers may help achieve a successful outcome, so try to compromise.

Always discuss how the builder's rubble will be disposed of and when.

Finally

- Be flexible - you may need to compromise on the position of roof windows and dormers, for example.
- Don't ignore your neighbour, especially if there is a party wall - you may need an agreement if you are affecting it in anyway.
- Take your time in planning - remember it's an investment that you want to increase your house's value.
- Be patient. No matter how good your builder is - this is a major job and it will inevitably be disruptive for a while.