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MAKING MOVES

The best of this week’s property on sale

Compiled by
Georgia Lambert

HOUSE OF THE WEEK

WEST SUSSEX

Wake up to dreamy views of the coast in this five-bedroom art deco beachfront house with a perfect WFH library set-up. “There are no roads between us and the shore,” says the owner. “At night we sit and enjoy the sound of the sea and the dark skies.” Barnham is four miles away; trains from there to London Victoria take an hour and a half. **01243 587687, henryadams.co.uk**



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£425,000

CUMBRIA

The Croft in Hethersgill is a four-bedroom period home ten miles from Carlisle. There's a two-acre paddock, a vast pond, and exposed stone walls and original wooden shutters inside. **01228 810300, haywardtod.co.uk**



£2.65M

LONDON W8

This four-bedroom slim lilac house may look bitesize, but there's 1,414 sq ft of space set over three floors, with a south-facing garden. Notting Hill Gate Tube station is round the corner. **020 7313 8408, struttandparker.com**



£3.45M

BERKSHIRE

The oldest parts of St Mary's Farmhouse date back to the late 18th century, and it hasn't been on the market for 28 years. It has six bedrooms, ten acres, a large wine cellar and a sauna. **020 7861 1080, knightfrank.co.uk**



£2.25M

BEDFORDSHIRE

Over 600 years old, 11-bedroom Harlington Manor briefly housed the *Pilgrim's Progress* author John Bunyan, and is presently a B&B. Trains from Harlington take 44 minutes to get to London St Pancras. **01582 465 000, savills.com**



£6M

LONDON W4

This six-bedroom Victorian house in Chiswick includes a 31ft living room, off-street parking and a sumptuous cinema room, complete with climate-controlled wine cellar. **020 8567 6757, fineandcountry.com**

0/0
£100,000**HIGHLAND**

This one-bedroom cottage on Sandside Harbour in Reay is close to sandy beaches and has planning approval to convert the attic into a second bedroom. Thurso is a 20-minute drive. **01553 769100, bellingham.co.uk**



£850,000

LINCOLNSHIRE

This Georgian house has four bedrooms, each with a private bathroom. Two of these are in a separate annexe. It's in the village of Tydd St Mary, a 12-minute drive from Wisbech. **01553 769100, fineandcountry.com**



£1.15M

CORNWALL

Quay Cottage, which was once believed to have been an explosives store, is a charming three-bedroom bungalow on the edge of Restronguet Creek, a 20-minute drive from Truro. **01872 261160, jackson-stops.co.uk**

MARKET WATCH**WHY THE GLOBAL CRACKDOWN ON OLIGARCHS IS GOOD FOR YOU TOO****EMANUELE MILDOLIO**

@ManuMidolo

The invasion of Ukraine has shone a light on dirty money in the UK, much of which is banked in property. Could the government's new economic crime law be the "silver bullet" needed to clean up our act?

The government said that new measures introduced by the act will "tackle corrupt elites" with a focus on Russian oligarchs with links to the Kremlin who launder their cash through London property. However, there is another aspect of the bill that will help the wider housing market, particularly leaseholders.

The Economic Crime (Transparency and Enforcement) Act will introduce a new register of overseas entities, requiring foreign owners of property to declare their identity. Companies who refuse to reveal their ultimate owners will face restrictions on selling the properties and rule-breakers could be fined up to £2,500 a day or face up to five years in prison.

Such a register was first announced by David Cameron, but the bill was rushed through parliament after the invasion of Ukraine and it received royal assent last week. Any overseas companies selling property in the UK will have to reveal their owners from February 28, 2022, and existing foreign firms will

have up to six months to provide this information.

The good news is that, in time, hundreds of thousands of leaseholders will finally know who owns the freehold to their homes — and will be able to confront them over unfair lease terms, such as doubling ground rents, or potentially buy the freehold.

Corporate freeholders are often based offshore and hide behind complicated anonymous company structures. For years, housebuilders have been selling the freehold of the homes they have built to such "professional" freeholders or private equity firms, who treat charges imposed on leaseholders as a steady income stream.

The anonymity provided by offshore firms makes it almost impossible for leaseholders to communicate directly with freeholders, who only get in touch to cash in through a process that Bill Esterson, the shadow business and industrial strategy minister, once described as "legalised extortion".

Mary-Anne Bowring, the group managing director at Ringley, a management company, says the bill is particularly important "so those can be held responsible for cladding remediation and fire safety changes".

Rules on transparency surrounding foreign ownership have taken too long to come into effect. However, from this week it will be much harder to hide behind anonymous offshore firms and cash in on England and Wales's antiquated leasehold system.

AT A GLANCE**INCREASE IN AIRBNB PRICES DURING EVENTS IN 2022**

- ◆ Average nightly price the week before event
 ◆ Average nightly price during event
 ◆ Increase

**Music events**

| | | | |
|------------------------------------|------|--------|------|
| Glastonbury Festival Pilton, UK | £162 | £521 | 222% |
| Exit Novi Sad, Serbia | £59 | £145 | 146% |
| Coachella Indio, USA | £550 | £1,297 | 136% |

**Sport events**

| | | | |
|--|------|--------|------|
| PGA Championship Tulsa, USA | £161 | £1,123 | 598% |
| Kentucky Derby Louisville, USA | £250 | £1,107 | 343% |
| Monaco Grand Prix Monte Carlo, Monaco | £255 | £1,045 | 310% |

Source: money.co.uk

Home

ENERGY BARS

Some residents of managed blocks have seen utility bills rise 200%. *Melissa York* reports

The cost-of-living crisis is upon us, but some of us are more in control of our bills than others. Flat owners are facing huge price rises for their electricity and gas because they are on communal systems that they are not in charge of. They are unable to shop around for the best deals or change suppliers; their utility contracts are renewed by unregulated management companies, often on behalf of absent landlords who own the building, and they must pay to heat and light communal areas with little say over how.

At Pan Peninsula, 762 flats across two high-rise towers in

Canary Wharf, east London, there has been a “serious amount of anger on the [residents’] WhatsApp group” after their annual service charge bill showed that the costs for heating and hot water would soar from £70 to £232 a month – a 231 per cent rise. “If you had a four-bedroom house you could understand these costs,” says Andy Yardley, 41, who works for a fintech firm. “But these are studio, one and two-bedroom flats in a modern building that’s fully insulated. [The heating costs] have gone up from 3.6 per kWh to 16.2 per kWh.” The building at Pan Peninsula is owned by the developer Ballymore. Its

management arm contracts the energy meters out to a firm called Communal Energy Partners (CEP) and the costs are billed to residents through the service charge. Payments towards the centralised heating system is a requirement written into the residents’ leases. “I can’t turn the system off or disconnect from it. I don’t have any choice at all – that’s the frustrating part,” Yardley says. Getting a simple breakdown of costs is a struggle because the residents are not CEP’s customers: Ballymore, the freeholder owning the building, is. “We want more transparency over the process of CEP being picked in the first

place. Are you doing a competitive tender every two years so we get the best value or are we just continuing with them and not bothering with anyone else?” Yardley says. “We never get an answer [from Ballymore].” The developer said: “Consumers across the UK are suffering rising wholesale energy costs. We regularly retender our energy requirements to ensure our residents benefit from the most competitive energy services. We will continue to work closely with resident associations and shall continue to seek third-party providers who are able to maximise cost efficiencies and

keep bills as low as possible for our residents.” Leaseholders can take over the running of the building themselves but they need a majority of flat owners to agree. At Pan Peninsula, 65 per cent of the leaseholders are overseas investors. “Getting them engaged is impossible,” Yardley says. At One West India Quay (OWIQ), a 33-storey skyscraper in Canary Wharf, the residents have no chance of taking over the management because there is a Marriott hotel at ground level that takes up 47 per cent of the floorspace. Under leasehold law, if 25 per cent or more of the development is given over to commercial premises such as shops, supermarkets or hotels, the residents cannot exercise their right to manage (RTM) the building. Some residents were being overcharged by 26 per cent after the freeholder, Yianis Group – owned by the millionaire John Christodoulou – admitted before a tribunal in 2016 that commercial-rate VAT and a climate change levy were included by mistake in their rates for heating, cooling and hot water. Some residents received

rebates but others were presented with extra charges that are still on the accounts, according to the OWIQ residents’ association. Yianis Group did not respond to a request for comment. At Spectacle Works, a factory converted into 80 flats in Plaistow, east London, residents got RTM in 2018 to take control of their bills. Their energy bill is only set to increase by 12 per cent because they hired a broker to shop around for a fixed deal. “Most block managers will not book more than 12-month contracts because they would need to consult with leaseholders, but when you’re looking at utilities, booking two or three-year contracts is so beneficial,” says Neil Woolfson at Thames Utility Brokers, who got a two-year fixed deal for Spectacle Works. It is also often unclear whether they are being overcharged or paying for heat loss in the communal areas, leaving leaseholders unsure how to tackle the problem. Most residents do not realise they are paying over the odds until they take over the management. Woolfson says: “It can be done but it’s really difficult to get those bills.”





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Home

After selling Pimlico Plumbers for £148 million, Charlie Mullins’s first act was to buy his riverside rental. Now he wants to solve the housing crisis

MELISSA YORK
@melyork



Standing in the bathroom of Britain’s richest plumber is quite a surreal experience. For the record, the taps are gleaming and Charlie Mullins has a freestanding, oval white tub with a full-frontal view of the MI6 building opposite. Does he still do his own plumbing? “No!” he says, aghast. He can certainly afford not to.

In September last year Mullins sold his company, Pimlico Plumbers, to the US home services group Neighborly. He started the business from a basement in south London in 1979 and it became the capital’s largest independent plumbing company – charging £120 an hour – and took care of the leaking taps and burst pipes of Simon Cowell, Dame Helen Mirren, Joanna Lumley, Joan Collins, Keira Knightley and Daniel Craig. Reports on how much he sold it for vary; so what’s the true figure? “I’m not supposed to say it was £148 million. They told me not to say it,” says Mullins, 69, with a mischievous grin. Saying things he probably shouldn’t is his speciality. He revels in being politically incorrect and regularly plumbs the depths with his revealing “jokes”.

Everything Mullins has

done for the past 40 years has been defined by his company, “but now I can just be myself,” he says. The first thing he did was buy the riverside flat he was renting in Pimlico. It occupies an entire floor, with a wraparound balcony and far-reaching views over the city; he bought it for £10 million. The singer Tom Jones lives upstairs and his other famous neighbours, according to Mullins, include “the carpet guy” – Carpetright millionaire Lord Harris – and “the wallpaper guy” – Lord Brownlow, who helped to pay for the refurbishment of Boris Johnson’s Downing Street flat.

Mullins’s son, Scott, kept a 10 per cent share in the company after the sale and stayed on as chief executive but “he’s now had enough of them, basically – the Americans. I had ten family members there and the last two went recently, two son-in-laws. The last Mullinses have left the building.”

So what is Mullins without Pimlico Plumbers? With his spiky blond hair, sinewy stature and gleaming white teeth, he is often mistaken for Rod Stewart.

Mullins, however, wants

“Does he still do his own plumbing? ‘No!’ he says, aghast. He can certainly afford not to

you to know who he is as soon as you step into his hallway. It’s lined with framed pictures and autographs from people he admires, from Margaret Thatcher to Michael Jackson. “Well, I don’t admire him any more, obviously, but he was a great artist,” he says. Elvis Presley is there, Vera Lynn, the Queen; the only one missing is Donald Trump, apparently. “He makes things happen,” Mullins says with a shrug. “He doesn’t sit on the fence.”

Taking pride of place on the hallway table are four framed photographs; Mullins with the past three Conservative prime ministers and Prince Charles. What’s he like? “Oh, I dunno, he just talks to me about boilers and that,” Mullins says. “He was really my favourite one,” he says, pointing at David Cameron. Mullins had a very public falling out with the Conservatives over Brexit, to which he was so opposed he erected a “Bollocks to Brexit” sign over the Pimlico office. He stopped donating to the party but says: “We’re still friends. I think [Brexit] was a bad move but I think they will reverse it eventually.”

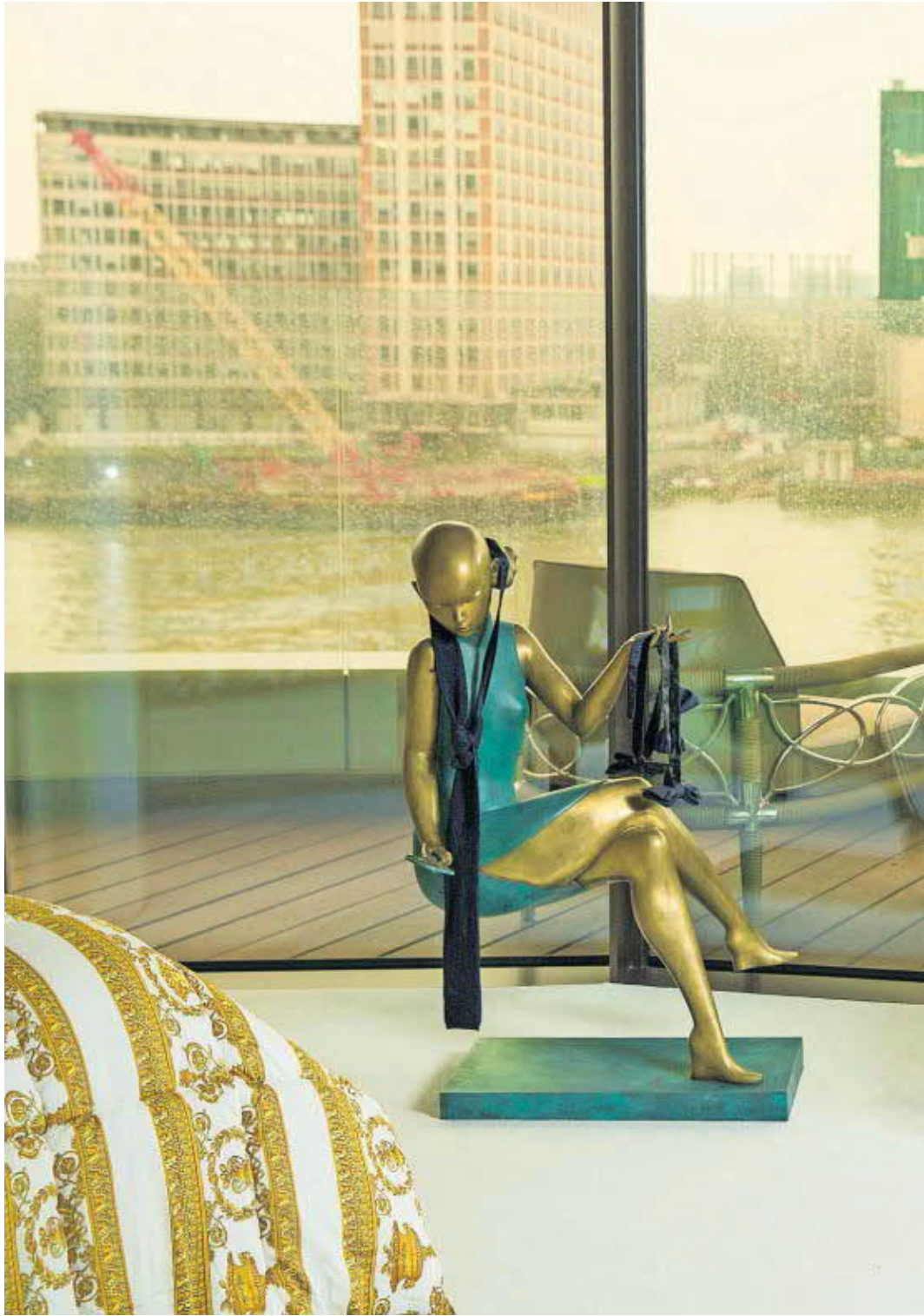
He occasionally talks to Johnson, he says, but he worked with Cameron on apprenticeships. “Theresa May is Theresa May, ain’t she? I mean, you wouldn’t want one at home like her, would you?”

Twice divorced, Mullins met his girlfriend, RaRa, 31, a singer whose real name is Rachel Leavesley, in Marbella. She flies out to Nashville soon to record her album, *Biker Boy*. She has her own bedroom in the apartment, with a Versace duvet that matches Mullins’s in the principal suite.

We move into the living room, which is dominated by a grey sectional sofa, bespoke rock-like cabinetry and a jukebox with a painting of Winston Churchill above it. They’re expecting a new bar soon, but the present one is propped up by Eric, a bronze skeleton protectively grasping two bottles of Moët. “What happened was, he stopped paying rent so we stopped feeding him.” Most telling of all is a sketch by the *Daily Mail* cartoonist Stanley McMurtry showing village folk gazing at a Palladian mansion captioned: “The Lord of the Manor? – no, that’s the local plumber”.

Proud of his humble beginnings on a Camden council estate, Mullins looked up to the local plumber, “who had a house, car, motorbike, holiday, nice clothes”. He took up an apprenticeship when he was 15. “That’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me.

FEELIN



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G FLUSH



AKIRA SUENORI FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES



I was told by the plumber that if you get an apprenticeship in a trade, you'll never be out of work and you'll have loads of money."

He hopes to inspire similar success in others and thinks jobs are the key to solving all of society's ills. He is not a fan of benefits for the "capable" unemployed, believing they incentivise people not to work, but he backs government-funded apprenticeships. He says: "Basically the people that cause problems now are the people with no work. They say they've got nothing to do. And you don't get many people that go to work that stab people."

Get ready to hear more of his political views; he says he has a "frank, fierce and fun" column in a national newspaper lined up – although declines to say which one – and regular appearances on Great British Radio, a new station launching next month with him as chairman.

And Mullins still plans to run as an independent candidate for mayor of London in two years. Turning empty shops into affordable homes for key workers is a "no-brainer", he says, and he is particularly irate about cycle lanes, which he blames for congesting London's roads. "It's just not working for London. I mean, cycle lanes..."

Mullins bought his first house in Lewisham, southeast London, for £9,000 in 1974, "with a 100 per cent mortgage off the council. I don't know if they still do that," he says. He sold it for £23,000. "I bought bungalows, redone them, bought another one, then

ended up in Keston Park [in Bromley, southeast London], which is the most prime place there. We had two houses – I bought the one next door and sold that with planning permission, so I've always been involved in property."

He bought a villa in Marbella 12 years ago, but plans to buy a second one in Spain and a plot to build another for his family to enjoy, plus a £26 million new-build in Dubai. But, surely, he won't be able to spend much time there if he's mayor of London? "You're not mayor at the weekend, are you?" he replies.

The third bedroom in his apartment is used as a home office. Mullins isn't a fan of WFH – "I call it WLFH: work less from home" – and he gave his office staff a £20 a day bonus, free food and drink and free parking to entice them back after the lockdown. "Kids seeing their parents working from home, they'll think it's normal, hanging about in your pyjamas."

Appearance is everything to Mullins, who believes he changed the image of plumbing from a "back entrance" trade to a more respectable one. He made a list of all the common criticisms such as "turning up late, not finishing the job, scruffy bastard, rusty old van, never giving the price, not transparent, not cleaning up after the job" and set out to do the opposite.

Now he's free of the firm, Mullins has to contend with the much harder job of reinventing himself.

Main: Charlie Mullins in his bedroom overlooking the MI6 building. From left: with his girlfriend, Rachel Leavesley; his kitchen. Above right: the living room is dominated by a jukebox under a portrait of Winston Churchill





Alison and Jon Everingham at Connect House, where they bought three off-plan flats and now face a £371,600 cladding bill

CAUGHT IN THE CLADDING TRAP

HIDDEN HOUSING SCANDAL

MARTINA LEES
@Lees_Martina

Landlords who innocently invested in buy-to-lets are facing huge bills to fix unsafe flats, but are excluded from new government aid

In Manchester, Alison and Jon Everingham invested their pension in three off-plan flats at Connect House, the former *Daily Express* offices. Paying their £371,600 cladding bill would cost them their daughter's chance to go to university, their plans to retire and their family home, says Alison, 55, a managing director. "We are devastated."

To make matters worse, gas pipes were damaged during works to replace cladding – leaving residents without heating and hot water, and landing the Everinghams with reduced rents and yet more costs to house their tenants elsewhere. Their case falls outside the new measures the government announced to protect flat owners from the costs of making buildings safe.

They are not alone. Ajay Bhadresa, 41, a video editor, has a £204,000 bill to replace flammable insulation and timber walkways at Transport House in Salford, where he bought two buy-to-let flats to fund his pension. "The money we're being asked to pay is more than I paid for one of my flats," he says. "Unfortunately for me, I do own another property – the one where I live." That means Bhadresa too is blocked from measures shielding fellow leaseholders.

Ros Morley, *inset*, invested in two small flats with state compensation for the death of her husband in the London 7/7 bombings. Now she faces "vast bills" to fix fire risks in the façade of the Chocolate Box. She is also excluded from any financial assistance.

The story of fire risks that trapped at least three million people in unsafe or unsellable homes, exposed by Grenfell, has been one of life-changing financial and human costs for innocent homeowners. Investors who have ploughed their pensions into property are learning just how hard they have been hit. Diluted rules that allowed flammable materials on tall buildings since 2000 coincided with a boom in buy-to-let. In many city-centre blocks, small-scale landlords make up significant portions of leaseholders. Yet last month the housing secretary, Michael Gove, left hundreds of thousands of

them out of changes to the landmark Building Safety Bill.

The draft legislation exempts leaseholders with just one property – where they live or which "accidental landlords" were forced to let out – from all costs to replace cladding. It also caps repairs for other fire risks at £10,000 (£15,000 in London) for those with one or two UK properties, regardless of whether they live there or rent it out. The cap rises to £50,000 for flats worth more than £1 million, and £100,000 over £2 million. But landlords with more properties face unlimited costs.

Such landlords still have access to the government's £5.1 billion funds to fix cladding on blocks taller than 18m. In buildings above 11m, they would also benefit from clauses in the bill that put developers

and cladding manufacturers first in line to pay to fix all defects. But if those companies cannot be found or forced to pay up, buy-to-let investors won't have the same cap or cladding exemption. They fall off a cliff edge, with no statutory cover even for some of their flats.

The bill could also stop property investors from being able to sell. Any buyer would only get the cladding exemption and non-cladding cap if they purchase from an owner occupier, not from a landlord with a small portfolio. Then the lease will always stay "non-qualifying".

Further changes to the bill, expected on March 22, could extend protections to owners of more properties, according to a source with knowledge of the matter. Lord Greenhalgh, the building safety minister, hinted that the government did not intend to be "unduly unfair" to "landlords with pretty narrow shoulders".

On March 11 an inquiry by the housing select committee of MPs criticised Gove's landlord exclusion. "Buy-to-let landlords are no more to blame than other leaseholders for historic building safety defects, and landing them with potentially unaffordable bills will only slow down or

prevent works to make buildings safe," its report says.

Gove had told the MPs last month that the government was trying to avoid subsidising people of "significant means". But he did not rule out protection for more landlords: "If there are specific hard cases or systemic problems that emerge, we will look sympathetically at any amendments."

Mark Wittcomb, a retired firefighter, and his wife, Julia, an NHS nurse, used his pension to buy two small flats to support their "twilight years", he wrote to the MPs' inquiry. Both are in blocks above 11m with flammable cladding and other fire risks. The couple were "aghast" to discover that they won't qualify for support. Like 70 per cent of landlords, they are basic rate taxpayers.

However, people who own two UK properties plus homes abroad or other asset types are still protected under the bill. "Why are you suddenly worse off than a Russian oligarch with a penthouse?" says Ben Beadle, CEO of the National Residential Landlords Association. "If you have bought a property with the best intentions and all of a sudden you're presented with this [the fire-safety defects], it doesn't matter whether you're a landlord or an occupier."

The UK Cladding Action Group (UKCAG) says there is "no logical reasoning" for not giving such landlords the same protection as other leaseholders. Excluding them ensures blocks with significant portions of buy-to-let flats "will never be made safe". At Northpoint in southeast London, where the university administrator Ritu Saha started UKCAG, more than 60 per cent of flats are buy-to-let. Metis in Sheffield – where her co-founder Will Martin got a £100,000 cladding bill – is 90 per cent buy-to-let.

At the 18.5m-tall Victoria House in Leeds, which has fire risks other than cladding, only two of the leaseholders live in their flats. The rest are small investors who paid up to £135,000 for properties with a "guaranteed" return of 8 per cent that never materialised. "I don't see how our building will ever raise the remediation funds if we don't get the protection given to owner-occupiers," Elizabeth Avery says. She bought a one-bedroom flat off plan in 2018 as an income stream after her husband lost his job.

Mike Fox, an accountant, invested in three buy-to-let flats "because pension provision has been so decimated and missold". All three blocks now have fire safety problems that could cost him £50,000 for cladding and another £50,000 to fix other risks. "I'm 60 now and I'd probably have to work until I'm 75. Why am I being victimised and financially ruined?"

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“Ros invested in two flats following the death of her husband in the 7/7 bombings. Now she faces ‘vast bills’



LECKHAMPSTEAD

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

Guide Price: £2,000,000

6 3 4 N/A EPC

Buckingham Office: 01280 821100

- A Grade II listed 17th century detached farmhouse on a 0.75 acre plot
- Self-contained one bedroom annexe
- Two double garages and off street parking
- Rural position with panoramic countryside views



EVERSHOLT

BEDFORDSHIRE

Guide Price: £1,500,000

4 3 3 E EPC

Woburn Sands Office: 01908 586400

- An Edwardian detached house on a private plot of 0.5 acres
- Extended and refurbished to include a two storey extension
- Gated driveway parking and double carport
- Village location just outside Woburn Abbey's parkland



HENTON

OXFORDSHIRE

Guide Price: £1,375,000

4 4 4 E EPC

- A detached former farmhouse
- Formal gardens with summerhouse
- Approx. 1 acre of separate paddock
- Double garage and off street parking

Princes Risborough: 01844 396000



SOUTHCOTT VILLAGE

BEDFORDSHIRE

Asking Price: £1,350,000

9 5 5 N/A EPC

- A Grade II listed 15th century cottage
- Separate Lodge House
- Driveway parking
- Situated in a conservation area

Aylesbury: 01296 336227



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HERTFORDSHIRE

Offers Over: £1,250,000

5 3 3 E EPC

- An early Garden City property
- Self-contained ground floor annexe
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- Walking distance from amenities

Hitchin: 01462 441700



BEDFORD

BEDFORDSHIRE

Offers Over: £1,100,000

6 4 3 E EPC

- A Victorian Villa style property
- Landscaped south facing rear garden
- Double length garage
- Walking distance from town centre

Bedford: 01234 220000



STOKE HAMMOND

BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

Offers Over: £950,000

7 3 2 F EPC

- A detached former farmhouse
- Separate home office
- Driveway parking and triple carport
- Plot of approximately 0.3 acres

Milton Keynes: 01908 399199



ALDERTON

NORTHAMPTONSHIRE

Offers In Excess Of: £800,000

4 4 3 E EPC

- A Grade II listed 17th century cottage
- Self-contained detached annexe
- Driveway parking for four cars
- Plot of 0.3 acres with countryside views

Towcester: 01327 350022

Home

SELF-BUILD STARTERS

Want to be forward-thinking and future-proof?
From smart tech to oriel windows, here are ways
you can upgrade your home. By *Jayne Dowle*

MICROCEMENT

Cement finishes on external walls and poured-concrete walls are so last year. In 2022 it's all about microcement wall finishes in showers and wet rooms as a seamless alternative to tiling. Options range from rustic travertine-style to subtle low-contrast shade effects.

"Recently, we've really been pushing the boundaries with microcement walls," says Sally Hotchin, the director of the microcement specialist company Relentless. "With advanced trowel

movements often used in Venetian plastering, we can create a wide range of exclusive patinas, including bespoke murals from your own high-resolution photographs."

Successful microcement application requires skill and patience. Relentless does a 100 per cent waterproof microcement kit for wet rooms, designed specifically for DIYers and available in more than 40 shades and three finishes (matt, satin and gloss), from £295 (relentlessmicrocement.com).

ORIEL WINDOWS

The trend for a box window that juts away from an external wall has evolved with the frameless structural glazing vogue. Oriel windows give the feeling of being outside while indoors and are used to create a striking break against the solid mass of a typical black-cladded extension.

"These bay-style windows protrude and provide snug reading corners, which are perfect for family members who are looking for some quiet or just want to admire the surrounding green space."



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TONY LANGMORE/FT PHOTOGRAPHY; PATRICIA RAYNER



Clockwise from left: kitchen with smart lighting; oriel windows, and vertical sash windows, both by IQ Glass; wall painted in Brouns & Co linseed paint in Church Bell



Oriel windows by IQ Glass, from £1,800-£2,500 a square metre (iqglassuk.com).

SELF-POWERED HOME

Soaring energy costs, climate change concerns and fears over future supply are prompting architects to design homes that are fully self-sufficient in energy terms and capable of generating and storing their own power. “With electricity prices going through the roof, the high capital cost of a fully self-sufficient renewables set-up is looking more and more attractive to self-builders,” says Jason Orme, a property expert for the National Homebuilding and Renovating Show (Birmingham, March 24-27). “Being self-sufficient in electricity means combining PV panels with the emerging – and increasingly good value – battery stores as well as a back-up. It’s not a cheap package, but all of a sudden the payback looks a lot better.” Costs vary because each energy package is bespoke. Orme recommends Sonnen, a German company specialising in solar power and battery storage.

LINSEED PAINT

It has been around since the first Queen Elizabeth was on the throne and is still popular in Scandinavian countries, where original coats have survived for 500 years, and now linseed paint is undergoing a renaissance with architects and self-builders looking for sustainable products. It is especially effective for builds that feature lots of timber and it is highly

durable; Brouns & Co experts say that they expect a coat of linseed paint to last 10 to 15 years and require a rub-down with linseed oil just once a decade to keep it in good nick.

The company’s paints are hypoallergenic and made entirely of boiled linseed oil from flax harvested in Wetherby, Yorkshire, and ground natural pigments. Available in 40 shades, from £49.50 for one litre of interior paint and £59.50 for exterior paint.

RADIANT RADIATORS

Among the innovations making radiators more efficient, we especially like the radiant heat models in the Radiator Company’s Ceramica collection, made from recycled materials, because they deliver effective heat and recycle waste.

“They are manufactured in white with three finishes – smooth Senso, ribbed Varenna and textured Pavia – using waste from the production

of marble worktops and shower trays,” says Simon Morris, the marketing manager at the company. “Unlike traditional radiators, they produce radiant heat for an even and direct transfer of heat, using less energy and giving lower CO₂ emissions.”

SMART TECH

The “people-sensing platform” Butlr uses Heatic sensors, which detect changes in temperature. The US-based company is developing a range of super-reactive technological products such as the Butlr smart home gadget, which makes use of wireless thermal sensors. This can work in conjunction with any heating system, including gas, adjusting it as people come and go. Butlr sensors cost from \$220 (£167) and are available to buy in the UK. Additionally, smart lighting controlled via smartphone will allow you to get closer to achieving a fully automated home.

HEMPCRETE

The architect Katy Esdon, a co-director of the Wiltshire-based company Esdon Architecture, says that her clients are asking about alternative forms of insulation from established man-made materials such as glass or mineral wool. She’s using hempcrete – made from hemp, the balsa core of the cannabis sativa plant – which forms the walls and insulation in one. From the Hemp Block Company, from £28.30 a square metre.

VERTICAL SASH WINDOWS

What’s next in glazing? Rebecca Clayton, the communications director of IQ Glass, says: “Everyone has slim-framed sliders, so now people want to have sliders that are extremely large sizes. Everyone has got a frameless roof light, so now people want one that also opens automatically. Everyone has bi-fold doors, so now we get asked for glass walls that rise up.”

Really? Yes, the good old sash window has entered

the 21st century. IQ Glass manufactures vertical sash windows in two or three-pane configurations, with the bottom pane rising upwards to reveal an aperture – a glass wall that rises and falls, in other words. The opening system connects vertically sliding glass panes to an integrated pulley system, and counterweighted engineering allows the panes to slide naturally upwards. From £3,000 to £5,000 a square metre.



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Home

HOW YOUR HOME CAN

When positivity is in short supply, our houses still have the power to boost morale and bring back cheer. From

“
Pink is the colour of cuddles. It makes our shoulders drop when we walk into the room

Natasha Bradley, 32, an interior designer and colour psychologist, and her husband, Sam Bradley, 31, co-founder of Lick paints (lick.com), live in London but rented a cottage in Somerset, near Bruton, as a country getaway six months ago, which Natasha transformed with a feelgood palette and attempts at upholstery.

“Most landlords slap brilliant white on the walls. I said, ‘Is there any way I can have the colours I want if I supply the paint for free? I am more than happy to paint over everything when we leave. We plan to be there a minimum of five years and by that time it will need a fresh lick of paint anyway.’ He said yes, so we started to plan our colours,” Natasha recalls.

“In my job I do consultancies and help people transform their homes; when it came to our own home I kept in mind I wasn’t designing for anyone else but us, and I could do what makes us both happy and reflects our personalities,” she says. “I asked Sam: ‘What brings you joy, and what colours are you most drawn to?’ – and, funnily enough, he is most drawn to the pinks and I love blue.”

Her top tip? When choosing colours hold your nerve. “Trust your gut. Without any furniture the dark green kitchen looked very cold at first and the living room looked bubblegum pink, but once the furniture was placed and the artwork was hung everything came together.”

The couple chose tones that they had the most emotional connection to. According to Natasha, the green gives an energy boost, while the blue in the bedroom creates a feeling of escapism. “Pink is the colour of cuddles. It makes our shoulders drop when we walk into the room and we immediately feel ready for a wind-down evening. Every room has an element of it.”

Natasha believes that you should always have an element of fun in every room every time. “We bought the yellow vase with the smiley face in a gallery in Bruton, and it catches my eye and I smile every time I walk into the living room,” she says. “I’d also say remember that not everything has to be perfect. In fact imperfection can bring joy. I did an online course in upholstery – it was one of those lockdown ‘want to learn a new skill’ things. I buy fabrics at Shepton flea market and make cushions and very, very bad curtains. I do it very badly but I love it.”



AN MAKE YOU HAPPY

From mood-enhancing colours to witty interiors, give your decor a dose of dopamine, says *Katrina Burroughs*



**SHOP
HAPPY**

▲ Get instant sunshine with extravagantly ruffled and vividly coloured In Casa by Paboy cushions. Peony blue ruffle and ochre sunflower ruffle pillows, about £140 each; incasabypaboy.com



▲ Joyous tableware from Yinka Ilori. Tablecloths, £115, set of four round place mats, £110, and four woven placemats, £95; yinkailori.com

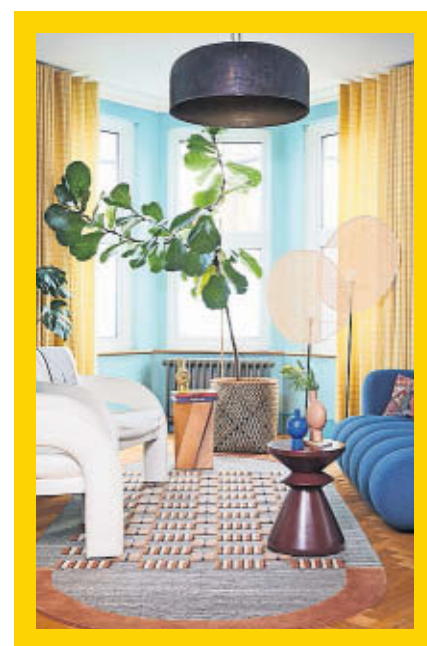


“When you walk in the house that very bright yellow sunshine hallway makes you smile

In some houses everything is shiny and hard and it lacks a warmth. For us a home has to be comfortable. When you enter a room you want to be enveloped by something tactile and warm and comforting. Texture does that for us, and layers of pattern,” says Dylan O’Shea, who shares a Victorian terrace in South Tottenham, north London, with his partner in life and design, Caroline Lindsell. “There’s always something interesting to look at. Each little detail incrementally makes a difference to your mood.”

The pair moved in in April 2013, shortly before their daughter was born and they started their studio, A Rum Fellow (arumfellow.com). Today, when you walk into the house, a very bright yellow sunshine hallway makes you smile as you open the door. The yellow extends from the front door all the way up to the bedrooms at the top. The latest addition has been the yellow stair runner from a collaboration with Roger Oates. The studio also works with Mayan weavers in Guatemala.

O’Shea says: “Having something that’s beautiful in your home enriches your life, but our aim with working with the groups of Mayan weavers is about creating sustainable livelihoods. That is part of what brings joy into our home.”



▲ Treat yourself to cheerful candles. Hay’s spiral candles, £25 for a set of six; libertylondon.com

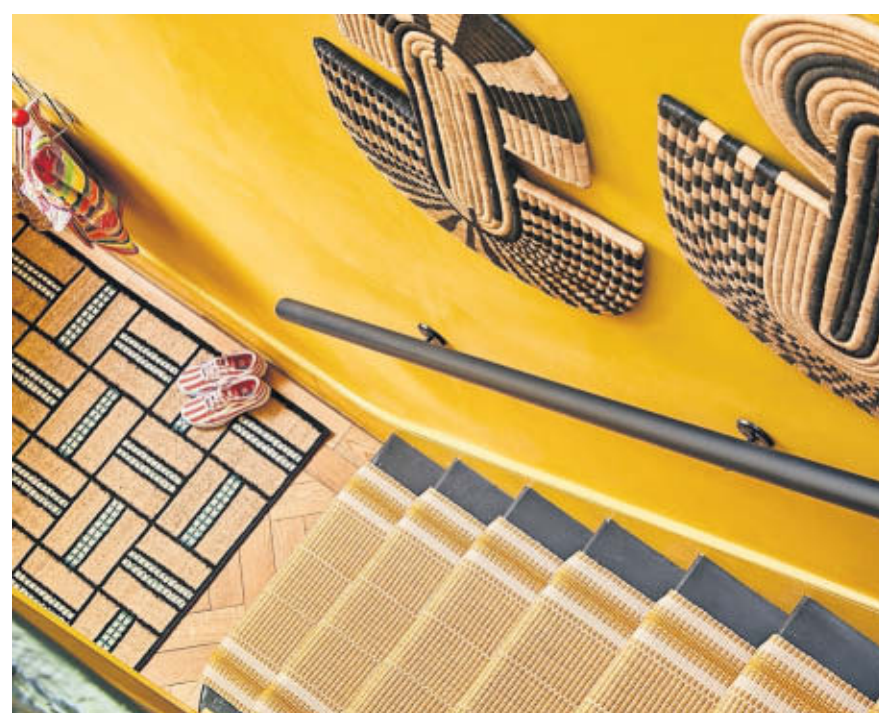


◀ Adam Nathaniel Furman’s new set of hand-blown glass tumblers, £182 for three, and carafe, £210, is inspired by chess pieces; beit-collective.com

► John Lewis’s Anyday Bonn upholstered bed frame, £199; Bistro dining bench, £349; Scandi Petals duvet cover set, £35; Elevation throw, £35; Hem bedside table, £99; and Harry table lamp, £30; johnlewis.com



▲ Oliver Bonas’s Cecily woven scalloped wool rug, £150, available from April; oliverbonas.com



A NARROW VICTORY

The galley kitchen beats open-plan set-ups for efficiency and entertaining guests. No wonder it's making a comeback, says *Kate Watson-Smyth*

Galley kitchens used to be regarded as a disaster – tiny, with barely enough room to open the doors, never mind swing the proverbial cat. But as our homes get smaller and space is ever more precious, the galley – which takes its name from the efficiently laid-out kitchens on narrow ships – is making a comeback.

A traditional galley has units on both sides with a corridor down the middle, but such is the practicality of its design that the layout is often applied in larger rooms, where

one of the walls is replaced with an island. This brings all the convenience of having everything within reach but is a more sociable set-up as friends and family can sit and chat while you cook.

I designed my kitchen – nearly ten years ago – exactly like this. The hob and oven are in the island, with the sink, fridge and a wall of open-shelf storage behind. I can unload the dishwasher without taking a single step, pivot from hob to sink to drain pasta, and grab plates, bowls and glasses from the shelves above.


At the same time an acquaintance had knocked


down most of her internal walls to create a huge open-plan kitchen, living and dining space. When the work was complete she complained about how far she had to walk between fridge and cooker, and how suddenly someone watching television on the other side of the room meant that everyone was compelled to listen to the same show. It was the ultimate enormous designer kitchen that didn't work for anyone, whether they wanted to cook, eat or relax.

I have been a fan of tightly designed kitchens ever since. You can tuck yourself away, listen to the music of your



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Left to right:
Limehouse
kitchen by
Neptune, from
£12,000; Classic
English kitchen
by DeVol, from
£25,000; Naked
Kitchens' Naked
Doors (from c
£3,000); Henley
kitchen by
Neptune, from
£14,000

choice and meditatively prepare dinner without distraction, and there's no space for boisterous children, pets or grumpy partners.

Whether you have a traditional galley kitchen or have adapted it with a row of cabinets along one wall, creating one that is really efficient requires a slightly nerdy attention to detail right from the start.

Just how many plates do you have and how many do you actually need? How many pans and serving dishes? Is the washing machine going in here, or can it move to another part of the house? Must you

have a dishwasher? Will a slimline one be sufficient?

The key to successful planning is to imagine yourself in the kitchen making your meals and thinking about how many people might be there at any one time. Putting the kettle, toaster, mugs, coffee and bread in one place while the cereal and bowls are stored close to the fridge will help to prevent traffic jams in the morning while someone else is at the other end looking for the dog food. Better still, replacing the kettle with a boiling water tap will free up precious worktop room.

Waste is the buzzword of the

21st century but it applies as much to space as to products. Do you need a large fridge or will a smaller under-counter one mean less wasted food? Do you tend to batch cook and freeze or do you just need a small space for cocktail ice?

Open shelves will make the space feel less enclosed but make sure your kitchenware is attractive enough to be on show. If you do want wall cabinets, consider sliding doors so you don't bash someone on the head when you open them. Then paint them the same colour as the walls so they recede.

Only once you have

planned every cupboard and counter can you start to think about colour. In a small space you can afford to go bold.

High-gloss paint and handleless doors will add a sense of sleek sophistication. In fact choose as many reflective surfaces as you can to bounce the light around – a foxed mirror makes a great splashback. Integrated appliances will add to the pared-back feel and make your kitchen seem lighter and brighter, and less cluttered.

A stainless-steel worktop will also help with this, and is the toughest, most practical solution; there's a reason restaurants choose this material over marble and wood.

Underfloor heating will keep the temperature constant and means you don't lose space to radiators. And if the surface is small you can really go to town with the tiles – this might be the place to add colour and pattern as it won't make the room feel smaller. Replacing standard kickboards with mirrors will also make the floor look larger and give the impression that the cabinets are floating.

A galley kitchen may be small, but with a little planning it can be beautiful too.

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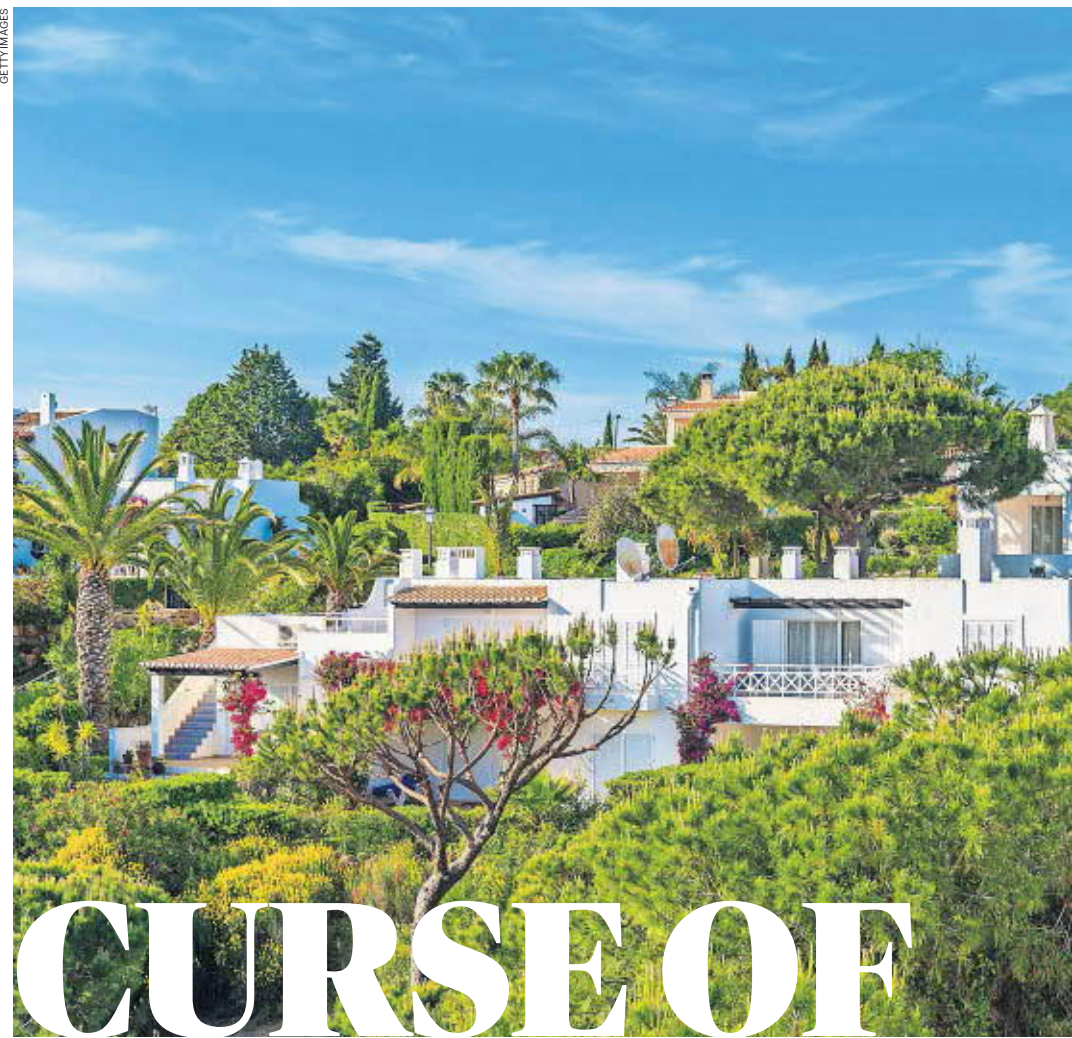


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Home

GETTY IMAGES



CURSE OF THE 90 DAY RULE

Unable to visit sick family or stay for the summer, Brits with homes in Europe are furious with the new post-Brexit limits. By *Zoe Dare Hall*

The members of 180 Days in Spain, a Facebook group campaigning to change the 90/180 day rule that limits the stays of British citizens in Europe post-Brexit, are tying themselves in knots trying to work out when they can use their holiday homes.

"We upgraded from an apartment to a villa in 2019, intending to spend two months in Spain and two months in the UK on a rolling format," says Jane Renshaw, 54, who has owned a home on the southern Costa Blanca for 16 years. "But even though we aren't going over our 180 days [in the Schengen zone in a single year], the new rules don't allow for this."

The 90/180 day rule refers to a waiver that means British citizens do not need to apply for a Schengen visa to visit the area, which comprises 26 European countries, for 90 days in a 180-day period. However, it restricts stays in

all Schengen countries to a total of three months in a six-month period, which was not the case before Britain left the EU.

Renshaw is number-crunching to work out whether she can spend 50 days there this summer. Adding to her uncertainty, she sold her house in Nottinghamshire just before she flew to Spain in January and hasn't yet found anywhere else to live. "So we have a house in Spain that we can't stay in, and we're homeless in the UK. It's madness – 180 days out of 360 would be so much easier," she says.

Another member of the group, Phillip Everett, a retired actuary from Bristol who has a home in the Murcia region, explains that 60 days abroad, then 60 days at home in the UK simply doesn't work. "On day 31 of your second 60-day stay, you will have exceeded 90 days in the past 180 days," he says. And Andrew Hesselden, a London-

based branding consultant who runs 180 Days in Spain, says he has worked out that the number of days you can spend in and out of Europe needs to be divisible by an even number.

The 180-day allowance keeps rolling, so you need to count backwards to work out how long you have spent in the Schengen area. "People need to imagine themselves on the day in the future when they exit the Schengen zone, and from *that* date look back 180 days," says Mark Leigh, 65, a retired chartered engineer who has owned his home near Alicante since 2015. His primary concern is no longer being able to help his 95-year-old father-in-law, who has lived on the Costa Blanca for 35 years. "He needs a lot of help, which previously we could provide for extended periods. Now, with 90/180, we have no leeway nor forgiveness for overstays on compassionate grounds," Leigh says.

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Top, Stella Fox in her villa in Benitachell, near Alicante. Above, Jane Renshaw, far right, with family. Left, holiday apartments in Carvoeiro, Algarve

There are websites and apps that can help you to calculate your stay in Europe, including the Schengen Stay Planner app. Spreadsheets of varying complexity are doing the rounds too. “Some don’t support multiple trips in the same household, such as a husband and wife on different timelines,” points out Leigh, who has come up with the “Simple Schengen Calculator” spreadsheet on Excel, which he has shared with the 180 Days in Spain group.

From rock climbers to the retired, few people are finding that this one-size-fits-all rule works for them. “For the past eight years, we’ve spent most of the winter in our motorhome touring the best climbing areas in southern Europe,” says Dominic Oughton, a part-retired innovation consultant in his mid-fifties from the Peak District. “This rule has greatly affected caravan and motorhome ‘winter visitors’ who typically migrate south in autumn and return home in spring.” Oughton travels

under the French temporary long-stay (VLS-T) visa, which allows a 180-day visit.

Stella Fox, who is also retired, can’t stay in her villa near Alicante as often as she used to. “If we’d had private medical insurance in 2020 we could have got Spanish residency, but we missed the deadline and now we have to leave our home empty for long periods at a time,” says Fox, 73, from Kingston upon Thames, southwest London.

The retirement market has been hardest hit by the new limits on time spent overseas, says Jo Leverett, the head of international sales at Cluttons estate agency, but for the average working family 90 in 180 days is more than enough. “If you have a UK-based job and a family it’s hard for you to go over the days,” she says. “Also, some companies are prohibiting their employees from working abroad, mostly due to tax liabilities.”

It’s possible to buy more flexibility. Geoff Robertson, a London-based lawyer, has bought through Cluttons a three-bedroom flat for €750,000 in the Parque das Nacoes area of Lisbon, Portugal, to get a “golden visa” that allows freedom of travel in the EU.

“Now, with 90/180 we have no leeway nor forgiveness for overstays on compassionate grounds

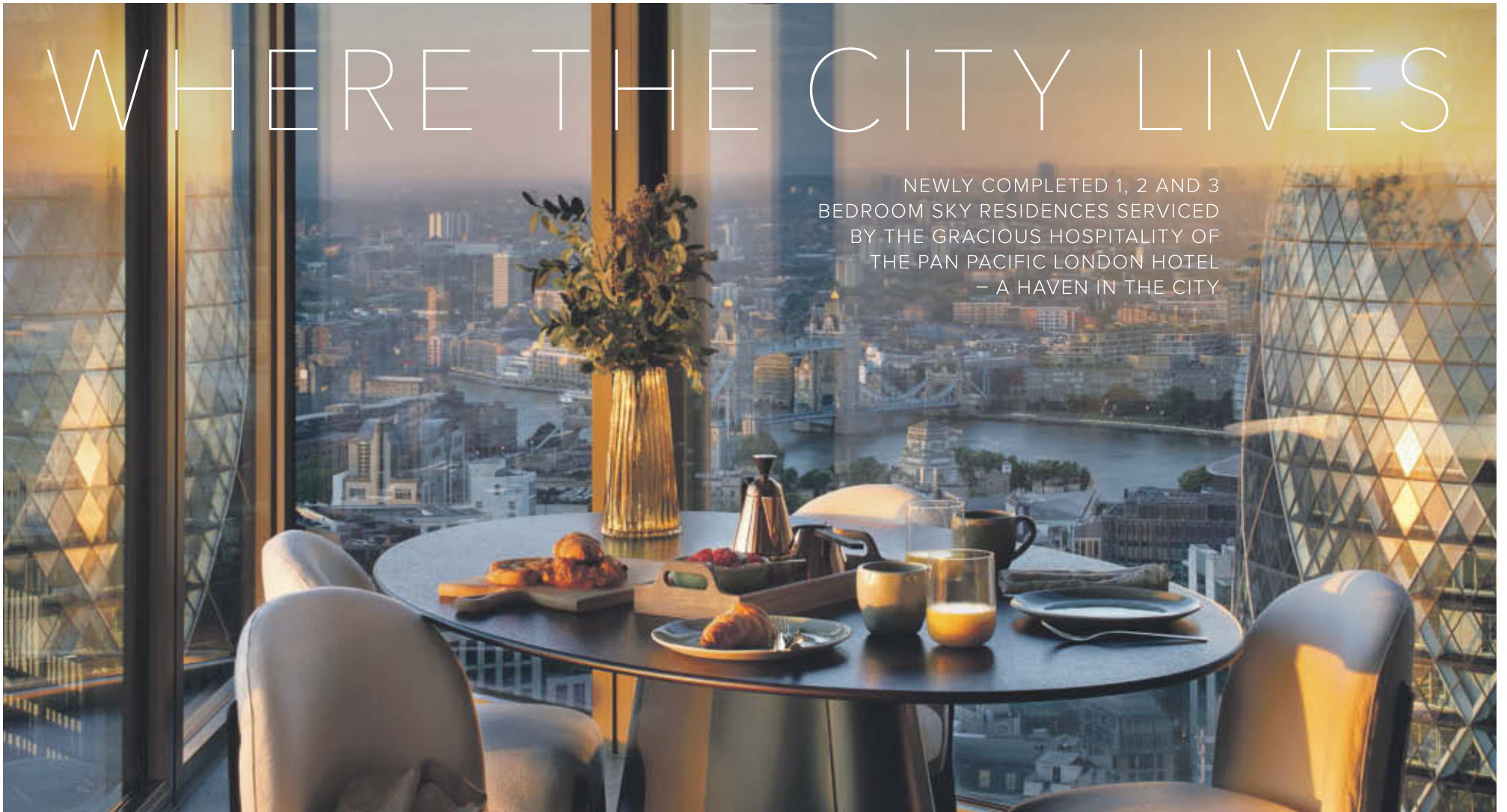
He intends to let the flat, then he will be allowed to use the villa he bought in the Algarve 25 years ago for €1.5 million whenever he wants. “It is incredibly frustrating, but it is what it is,” says Robertson, 61. “The golden visa process has been fairly straightforward, and I’m pretty confident the Lisbon property is a good investment too,” he says.

In Portugal, “in certain parts, you can secure a golden visa on an investment property for as little as €280,000,” Leverett says. Even in the Algarve, most of which no longer qualifies for golden visa investment, buyers are choosing resorts with tourist licences that provide a visa opportunity and a guaranteed rental return for the first five years. “In some cases they are buying as

an investment that will get them a visa so they can use another property they have in Portugal,” says Joao Costa, a sales director at Ombria, a rural resort where the minimum purchase price for a golden visa is €400,000 (unmortgaged) rather than the usual €500,000.

If you don’t qualify for an EU country passport, you’re stuck with careful counting. “People can still spend all year in Spain, with the right money and a visa. But part-year residents can’t use their home in the same way they did before Brexit for up to six months a year without it impacting the time they can spend elsewhere in Europe,” Hesselden says.

There is hope, however. The 90 in 180 days stipulation is not a “rule” as such, but a “special permission” granted to certain countries, including the UK, that don’t have an arrangement with the country concerned, Hesselden says. “There’s nothing in the Schengen agreement to stop an official from Spain standing in the airport and handing out visas on arrival for free to UK passport holders, so I think this is easier to fix than people realise. But politicians need to want to do this.”



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The Aquafficient is a great choice for eco-conscious consumers, and is compatible with Economy 7, Solar PV and other types of renewable electricity sources.

A greener future for the UK?

Outdated heating systems and boilers are often highly inefficient and costly alternatives for homeowners. Some gas system boilers require a large cylinder tank of water to be heated before a household has access to hot water, which has numerable disadvantages.

Heating a large tank of water is an extremely time-consuming and inefficient method of acquiring hot water.

Often a full tank of heated water goes unused, meaning the energy used to heat the water is wasted as the majority of the water remains in the tank.



This is obviously an extremely damaging and wasteful use of fossil fuel energy, only contributing to the already growing pollution problem faced globally.

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The Aquafficient Eco+ can be used as a stand-alone water heating system or can be used in conjunction with other Fischer products. This ensures complete warmth, comfort and controllability. The Aquafficient Eco+ has a stainless-steel casing and includes 80mm of highly efficient insulation.

The unit is easy to install, and is available in a wall-mounted or floor-standing model. It can also be installed in a loft, garage, airing cupboard or utility room - it simply requires access to an external wall in order to install a single vent pipe.

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Home

The RHS advisory team responded to more than 100,000 gardening inquiries in 2021, spanning everything from watering advice to disease management. Here are their answers to the ten most asked questions.

1 My houseplant is yellow — what's the problem?
Overwatering kills more plants than any other cause, but yellowing can be due to cold or draughty conditions, or more commonly, a lack of nutrients, notably nitrogen and iron, or magnesium. To confuse matters, poor root function can prevent plants acquiring nutrients and this is usually related to overwatering and subsequent root death.

To investigate, tip the plant from its pot and examine the roots. If the roots are pale and firm, repot and feed with a balanced liquid fertiliser. If the roots are in good health but congested, repot into a larger pot with fresh potting compost or replace in the same pot after removing a quarter of the potting compost and replacing with fresh material.

If the roots are dark, brittle and rotted, and the potting media excessively damp and perhaps with a sour smell, overwatering is to blame. Again, repot with fresh potting compost. Foliar feeds (dilute fertiliser sprayed onto the leaves) can help the plant to grow new roots.

In hard water regions, alkaline water leads to excess calcium in the root zone that inhibits uptake of nutrients, especially iron. Ideally water with rainwater or de-ionised water to avoid this, but where this is not possible, treat plants with chelated iron fertiliser.

2 My tomato plants died last year. What can I do to protect my crop this time round?

Last year there was a reported five-fold increase in tomato blight – a fungal infection that appears as dark marks on stems and brown blotches on fruits with leaf rots. Once it takes hold a plant rarely survives beyond a week. Tomato blight appears and spreads in warm, wet late summer conditions. No fungicides are available to gardeners to control blight – gardeners can only save what fruits they can.

For subsequent years try rotating crops to reduce the risk of potential infection from resting spores, and avoid growing potatoes and tomatoes in areas where blighted plants occurred the previous summer. Potatoes left in the ground or dumped can regrow in spring and are a potent source of blight infection. Infected material should either be deeply buried (below the depth of cultivation), consigned to the



As days get warmer – and longer – the Royal Horticultural Society answers gardeners' ten most asked question. Now get outside ...



Brown rot is a fungal disease that can affect fruit trees, including apple trees, left

local council green waste collection (if allowed) or recycling centre, or burnt rather than composted.

Clean any garden equipment or plant supports that have previously come into contact with blight with a disinfectant. Hard surfaces and the glass in greenhouses can be cleaned in the same way.

3 I hear a lot about mulching in spring – what is it and what are the benefits?

Mulching is covering the soil with a light-proof material that suppresses weeds, slows evaporation and in some cases improves the soil. It is common in spring before weed seed germination peaks. Bulky organic mulches of wood chip or bark suppress weeds well, especially around trees and shrubs, and degrade slowly. As they rot, worms and other soil organisms move the organic matter into the soil, improving its texture.

Other materials, such as composted manure or mushroom compost, are rich in plant nutrients and feed the plants, but being finely textured they are less effective at preventing weeds and degrade quite quickly. They

are especially useful around vegetables and roses that need high levels of nutrients.

Confusingly, some opaque sheets, such as black plastic sheets or special paper, are called mulches – they are very effective at weed control but do not improve soil.

4 Some of the shrubs in my garden need cutting back as they've more than doubled in size. When is the best time to do this?

Shrubs are some of the most robust plants and can recover from pruning in any season in most cases. However, some pruning seasons are better for flower production than others.

Evergreen shrubs in need of hard cutting-back are best treated in late winter or early spring. Otherwise pruning after flowering is usually best. Bear in mind that pruning must retain some flowered shoots if berries are expected – such as with pyracantha, for example.

Late summer-flowering deciduous shrubs bear flowers on new shoots. Shortening all shoots by two thirds in late winter and early spring promotes plentiful strong new shoots.



Clockwise from above: experts advise on the best plants to keep in pots, such as a larger form of bonsai; how to keep roses disease-free; what mulching is; repotting plants and how to avoid tomato blight



Spring and early summer deciduous flowering shrubs – philadelphus, for example – are pruned after flowering by removing one stem in four to near ground level, choosing the biggest, oldest shoots to chop. For particularly large plants cut out one in three or even one in two to reduce size.

5 I live in a rental property and want to grow larger plants in pots. What does well in a container and what should be avoided?

Trees and shrubs, including climbers, are long-term container plants that renters might like to take with them when they move. Shrubs, including dwarf conifers, are the easiest, being very robust plants. Some of the best like acidic soil, such as camellia and rhododendron – acid soil is easier to provide in pots than attempting to change garden soil. Some shrubs resent dry soils and hate water-logged ones even more: Japanese maples and daphnes for example. These conditions can be hard to avoid in pots, so steer clear of these plants.

Roses and climbers take less well to life in pots than other shrubs, but smaller patio types are reliable choices.

However, less usual plants, such as phormium, hardy yuccas and, if winter protection is available, succulents such as agave, make very satisfactory larger container specimens.

Trees often do very well in pots – the restricted root zone stunts them to some degree and is characterful, like a larger form of bonsai. Grow as for shrubs – birches and hardy palms are good subjects.

Repotting every two or three years in late winter, either into a bigger pot or back into the same one after replacing 25 per cent of the potting media with fresh material, is very effective at keeping long-term plants healthy.

A word of warning – vine weevil can be a menace in pots. Counter these with a late summer drench with specialised nematodes.

6 My rose's leaves had black markings on them last year – what can I do to ensure they remain green and healthy?

Rose black spot is a common fungal complaint, disfiguring but seldom killing most roses – including hybrid teas, floribundas, climbers and patio types.

Many gardeners tolerate a certain level of black spot and practise good plant hygiene to limit its spread and return the following year – collecting and destroying or burying fallen affected leaves, and pruning out stems with lesions in spring. The estimated three million people new to gardening, however, are often understandably alarmed.

Where the problem is widespread and cultural management is not effective, fungicides are available. These should be used exactly as directed by the manufacturers and used only in a minimal and highly targeted manner.

Many new introductions are bred for resistance – however, they tend to fall victim after some years, so respite is only temporary. Certain older roses: the 1949 climber 'Aloha'; species such as *Rosa rugosa*; and some groundcover roses, notably the 'Flower Carpet' series, are also less susceptible.

7 My box plants have been stripped of their leaves – what should I do?

Box tree moth caterpillars, the larvae of box tree moths, start feeding within the canopy of box trees, bushes and hedges and can strip the

remaining foliage. Box plants can often survive extensive damage and regrow, but plants can die if the bark is eaten or defoliation occurs over several years. A relatively new introduction to Britain, first reported in private gardens in 2011, the caterpillars continue to extend their range from southern England. Alternatives to box could be a sensible precaution in your garden – try holly, pittosporum or berberis.

8 How can I minimise plastic use when gardening?

Plastic garden equipment and materials are inexpensive, lightweight and easy to maintain but not particularly durable. Disposing of garden plastics is not always easy, particularly due to contamination by soil, which can prevent recycling.

Pots are perhaps the commonest plastic waste, but some pots and cell trays are recyclable. Look for plants in grey pots called taupe, that more and more recycling services can separate, unlike black pots. Transparent trays can also be recycled. When buying pots and seed trays, durable ones made of bamboo and other biodegradable

options are available.

Using more durable products that have many seasons of potential use is less problematic than single-use products. Glass cloches and metal watering cans, for example, have a higher initial cost but potentially many years of service.

9 What's eating my plant?

Holes in leaves, fruit and stems and ragged leaf edges have many causes. Slugs and snails are perhaps the most frequent grazers, sometimes leaving behind a telltale shiny mucous trail. Larvae of many insects can feast on leaves, including caterpillars, sawfly and some beetle larvae. Very often "frass" (insect faeces) is present even though the larvae are camouflaged and hard to spot in the day. As the larvae mature, they can devour leaves voraciously, but by the time the gardener notices they will often be long gone. Ripped leaf edges can indicate bird damage, and if larger stems are severed, inspect the ground for the cloven hoof marks of deer or the footprints of rabbits.

The best advice in a healthy garden is to turn a blind eye to low-level damage, remove

visible signs of problem nibbles by hand and make your garden an attractive place for larger insects, birds and mammals, which will delight in helping to keep numbers under control.

10 The fruit on my trees appeared brown and shrivelled last year. What was the problem and will it happen again?

Brown rot is a particularly distressing fungal disease of apples, pears, plums, cherries and some other fruit and ornamental trees, causing a brown, spreading rot as the fruit approaches maturity or later in storage, cruelly crushing expectations of a good harvest. It is caused by the same fungi that cause blossom wilt of the flowers and fruit spurs.

The most practical strategy is to minimise the carry-over of the pathogen to the following year. This includes pruning out trees and disposing of infected spurs and blossoms to reduce the amount of fungus available to infect fruit; removing and disposing of all brown, rotted fruit promptly; and considering replacing persistently affected plants with less susceptible cultivars.

Home



TIME AND SPACE THE WAY WE LIVE NOW
TOM ALLEN

The comedian on Bromley, moving back in with his parents, and butlers

I bought a house on my own for the first time eight months ago. I'm still getting used to having my own company all the time. Until I bought this place I lived with my parents. I lost my dad last year, so the nature of home has changed as a result of that, but I'm still close to where I grew up, in Bromley, southeast London.

Is this the first time you've lived alone?
I was moving around and living with friends in London for about ten years, but moved back in with my parents a few years ago. It worked for my life as a stand-up. Everything is nebulous and insecure, so being at home gave me the bedrock that I needed.

Did being more secure professionally help you to buy?
My dad always encouraged me to save. It has taken me about 20 years to save enough for a deposit. In my mind my first home was going to be somewhere glamorous in town. The reality is I've bought an early-Victorian terraced house in Bromley three minutes from my parents.

Have you decorated yet?
For a long time I didn't have any furniture. [The comedian] Rob



Above: Allen with his parents. Below: Bromley, southeast London, where he grew up and now lives



Beckett, who's a friend, lent me rattan garden furniture, so my sitting room looked a little like a leisure centre. I've got a sofa now, though, so the rattan is in the garden next to the swing, slide and trampoline, which I inherited from the previous owners and do occasionally have a little bounce on. The place looks like a Beefeater.

How does it feel being Bromley's most famous resident?
I'm not. Rob lives around the corner, but we've both been usurped by Emma Raducanu, who hasn't invited me around for a game of tennis yet. I'm sure it's a matter of time.

You're always immaculately presented. Is your new house equally pristine?
I've always liked period properties and olde worlde things. I'd like to decorate it like Martin Chuzzlewit's house. I bought a round table, which is a bit wonky, a little Dickensian. Part of me would like my place to look like a museum – a bit like Dennis Severs's Georgian house in Spitalfields.

Your Instagram page has quite a few gardening shots. Are you comedy's answer to Monty Don?
I'd love to be. My dad always grew vegetables, so I want to create a vegetable patch in my garden. Not to be too maudlin, but I'd like to make that part of the grieving process.

Are you messy or a neat freak?
I like the idea of formal table settings. I always wanted to be a butler when I was a teenager – more Anthony Hopkins in *The Remains of the Day* than Paul Burrell. I like the idea of things being kept in order. I guess I was just scared of the world – I probably still am – and formality represents a world of things being in their place, and safety and security.

Do you ever secretly binge-watch *Selling Sunset* in a shell suit?
Well, I bought my first hoodie recently. It's a light-grey cashmere one from Marks & Spencer and I got it in the sale. I like it but one has to be very careful with stainage. I find relaxing quite difficult, so I treat my new hoodie as a relaxing uniform.

Is Bromley your forever home?
I actually like the mundaneness of Bromley. I love that small-town experience. I had these teenage dreams of being this highfalutin person, but the truth is I'm bound ceaselessly back to my small-town life. I'm grateful for that.
Interview by Nick McGrath

The Island is on Dave on Wednesdays at 10pm from March 23



WHAT CAN I DO TO IMPROVE MY EPC RATING?

I let a small mid-terraced house that recently received a D rating from an EPC inspector. The property dates from the mid-19th century. In the past five years I have installed top-quality double-glazed windows and doors, a new gas central heating system and additional loft insulation. All white goods are good quality and the floors have new carpets. All fireplaces are bricked up, with a vent brick installed. External walls have no cavity and are clay lump and red brick (all repointed ten years ago). There's a new electrical safety certificate, smart meter, gas boiler certificate and water meter. I am worried that I shall soon need a C rating to let the house. I consider myself one of the good landladies, but I have limited finances! What on earth can I do to improve my rating?
Linda Miller, Norfolk

First, check the quality of your energy performance certificate. EPCs are created by DEAs (domestic energy assessors) and not all are equally scrupulous. An EPC can be purchased for £35 to £120 – ask more questions at the lower end of the scale. The DEA should visit your home and collect information for the energy model that produces the EPC rating. They should include new energy-efficient windows, loft insulation and other measures you have mentioned, but this doesn't

always happen. Assumptions are made, which can lead to inaccurate ratings. If you have evidence of installation of new windows or insulation measures, give these to the DEA.

Every EPC will come with a list of recommended energy efficiency measures to improve ratings further. With solid walls it may be tricky to get to a C rating without insulating some of them either internally or externally. A lower-cost option might be to install insulation under the suspended timber floor. This involves lifting the floor, but there are less disruptive processes such as Q-Bot. Solar PVs can also help, whether on the roof or ground.

Small things can affect EPC ratings as well. The number of energy-efficient lightbulbs in the property is included in the energy model, as are the types of heating and hot water controls. Care must be taken when installing insulation measures in older buildings: hire a retrofit professional or conservation architect who has experience with historic buildings.

For a bespoke solution some DEAs or retrofit professionals should be able to give you a more detailed energy efficiency options report and help find a path to a C rating. To find a DEA, visit gov.uk. For retrofit assessors, go to trustmark.org.uk.

Dr Sarah Price, technical director at Qoda Consulting, an Efficient Building Solutions business, qodaconsulting.com

Send questions to homehelp@sunday-times.co.uk. Advice given without responsibility

READERS' CLINIC

WHY DO MY KING-SIZE FITTED SHEETS KEEP COMING OFF?

I have tried deep ones from John Lewis. Tempur fitted stay in place but don't last. Can you recommend any other brands?
Mary Seddon



have lasted and fit very well.
Helen
Belledorm fitted sheets (1,000 thread count) are extra deep and excellent.
Jean Wright

Check the dimensions of sheets. Is king definitely the right size? If sheets are too big or deep they pop off. I downsized and found organic cotton less likely to slip. It's more effort to get smaller ones on, but once in place they don't budge.
Amanda Kenton, Stanmore

M&S deep fitted sheets are brilliant. Measure the mattress: king size in the UK is 150 x 200 cm. Mine

After years of sheets pinging off my deep mattress, I find Rise & Fall fitted sheets stay put.
GKV

FUTURE QUESTION
Are there any nontoxic scented candles (with no VOCs)?

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