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## Seven ways to future proof your home so there's no need to downsize

Embrace technology, tweak the design and adapt your home so that it ages with you

By Alexandra Goss

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Premium



You have probably planned your finances for retirement, but have you future-proofed your home? Many people feel forced into downsizing their houses that are now too big or unsuitable, once full of life and now an empty nest.

That is the case for Hilary Flatman. She is selling her beautiful farmhouse near Faversham, Kent, in order to move somewhere that suits her and her husband, who are in their 70s, for the future.

“Being here has been like living in paradise,” says Flatman, whose five-bedroom property is currently under offer with Strutt & Parker. “Yet this is a house for a big life – three of our children got married here – and we’re now at a different stage.”

The Flatmans plan to stay in the area and would like a barn conversion that has easy access – not only for old age but also for their son, Christian, 33, who has Down’s syndrome and uses a wheelchair. “I’d like to be somewhere simple yet stylish, with plenty of natural materials,” Flatman adds.

With a bit of foresight and some difficult decision-making, it’s possible to create a home that will grow with you as you age. Living in a future-proof property doesn’t mean you have to compromise on good looks – far from it. And in many cases, you don’t even have to move house. Here are our top tips to create your forever home.



### **Adapt what you have**

Consider how your home will work as your needs change in years to come, without compromising on your current lifestyle. “It is sensible to have a flexible downstairs space that can be used as an additional reception room at present, but can be easily converted to a bedroom when climbing stairs becomes difficult,” says Carol Peett of West Wales Property Finders.

If your property has a suitable garage or outbuilding, you could convert this into an annexe, which could be let out now and turned into accommodation for help down the line. “In the countryside, an annexe is a number one requirement so that a carer can live next door,” says Harry Gladwin of The Buying Solution. “This is often far more cost effective than a private nursing home.”

### **Design for later life**



Give your home a thorough MOT to ensure it will work for the future. Doorways and corridors should be wide enough for a wheelchair; plan to have a good-sized downstairs bathroom; and think about where a stairlift could go – new versions can be fitted to awkward, small spaces.

Move sockets to knee height so they are easier to access and, when designing a bathroom, think about where you could install grab rails when they're needed. Some manufacturers allow you to plan the layout in 4D, meaning you can virtually "move around" the proposed room to check everything is at the right height ([find4d.co.uk](http://find4d.co.uk)).

If you're able to self-build your forever home, use the opportunity to really consider what you will need in the future. Gus Zogolovitch, property developer and director at Unboxed Homes, created Zog House in north-west London. While he currently has a young family, he looked to the future with a self-contained apartment that is currently rented out. When he and his wife downsize, they will swap and move into the apartment while renting out the house.



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## Let there be light

Getting sufficient natural light in your house or flat becomes increasingly important with age, as people over 65 spend an average of 80 per cent of their time at home, rising to 90 per cent for those aged over 85, according to the Thomas Pocklington Trust.

Remove net curtains and heavy drapes that can't be fully pushed back; check, too, that panes are clean and aren't blocked by heavy vegetation externally. Horizontal or vertical blinds are best for reducing glare.

At the age of 60, you are likely to require three times more light than you did at 20, so your electric lighting must be fit for purpose. Rather than fitting a stronger bulb, consider increasing the number of lights. Add wall, table or floor lamps in darker areas, install dimmer switches and replace a pendant fitting with one with multiple arms. When choosing light shades, pick pale colours to maximise light output.

Adequate task lighting – in the kitchen, bathroom, bedroom and living room – is also crucial. Sian Parsons, design associate at John Cullen Lighting, says lamps with adjustable goosenecks offer the most flexibility when reading.

## Update your decor



Forget nursing-home chic – if there is such a thing. “Future-proofing your home doesn’t mean sacrificing how beautiful it looks,” says Jen Bernard, founder and managing director of Bernard Interiors, who decorates Audley Villages properties.

She suggests using contrasting colours and tones to identify key features and create lines of sight that will aid easy navigation through the property; artwork and furniture can also help with orientation.

Opt for neutral carpets with a subtle pattern, which helps to make a clear definition between walls and floors. “Dark and small patterns can be confusing for dementia sufferers,” Bernard adds.

For bathrooms and kitchens, ensure flooring has grip and is easy to clean; brands such as Harvey Maria offer rubber and vinyl tiles that provide a good level of slip resistance, are waterproof and can be installed over underfloor heating.



## Embrace technology

Accessible and affordable, new tech can really improve your quality of life. “Gone are the days of unsightly red cords hanging from the ceiling, which can be pulled in the event of an emergency,” says Carsten Swift, a senior living associate at Knight Frank. “Now, apps connected to phones, watches, pendants and other discreet items of jewellery offer more flexibility.”

Install a camera or video doorbell to enhance security and peace of mind, suggests Phillippa Dalby-Welsh of Savills. Infra-red, touchless taps could also prove useful. Made by the likes of Grohe, these are easy on arthritic hands, help to reduce consumption and mean there’s no danger of forgetting to turn the water off.



## Rethink the garden

Buy lightweight, long-handled tools so you don't have to bend down and install raised beds to help knee and back problems. Consider, too, the ergonomics of the outside space – you may need to make structural changes to allow access from the property without steps and to ensure all paths are level.

“Low-maintenance gardens don't have to be dull,” adds John Lavin of Cognatum Estates. “Think about the elements that will give all your senses joy: sweet peas for scent; interesting textures of grasses for touch; colour and architectural plants for variety; pots of herbs for taste; and plants that encourage birds and insects for constant activity and interest.”

## Consider the planet

“People are a lot more eco-conscious these days and don't want to worry about rocketing heating bills when they're spending more time in the house,” says Becky Munday of Munday's estate agency.

“Solar panels and biomass boilers can help keep running costs down, while people are also looking at installing air purifiers and electric car charging points.”

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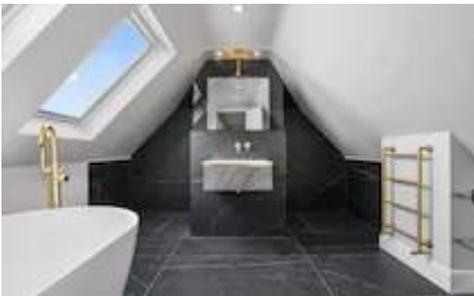


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