

Look at what you've got

To ensure your space is worth converting, and to make it viable as a functioning and practical room, you ideally need the highest point to be at least 2.2m. There should be enough space to fit a new staircase – preferably within the existing landing area on the first floor – and a new landing into the loft room. Next, look at the roof. The gradient of its slope should be analysed, explains Sarah Livesey, director at Econoloft, as this will not only dictate the type of conversion possible, but also the finished layout. Generally speaking, the higher the pitch the taller the ceiling, and the more floor space you'll have to work with. Anything above 30 degrees is workable. If you don't have much head height, it's still possible to convert – either by lowering the floor, raising the roof, or altering the shape of it by extending – but the project will cost more. To gain space, think about relocating a water tank if this is housed in the loft. Though you may need to install a new boiler or water system anyway if your existing plumbing can't cope with serving additional rooms. If the loft has a chimneybreast, you may prefer to have it demolished if it will obstruct the layout. "Remember – this will impact the structural stability of the whole property, so it needs to be carefully managed with input from a structural engineer," says Sarah. "Externally, check the condition of your roof tiles. If you need to re-tile or make repairs, do it as part of the conversion process."



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STEPS TO PLANNING AND COSTING A LOFT CONVERSION

Uncovering your loft's true potential can be tricky – especially if all it has been so far is rarely visited storage. A bit of vision could transform it into an ensuite, family bathroom or even a kitchen. Follow these tips to make your project a success

Words: **Lindsay Blair**



Originally an unused attic, designers at Build Team utilised the loft space to create an additional ensuite bedroom in this London property. Completed under permitted development and designed to comfortably fit under the eaves, the scheme features Velux rooflights fitted along the roof's slope to bring in plenty of natural light. Built-in wardrobes ensure every inch of space is utilised. The conversion cost £45,600.



Know the styles of conversion

There are five main types of conversion, ranging from a simple design with no major structural alterations to dramatic redesigns where the whole roof is replaced. Note that more complex designs may need planning permission.

Rooflight conversion: The most basic and often the most cost-effective form of conversion, with no major structural alterations providing there is sufficient head height. The existing space is converted, insulated, plastered, and a rooflight fitted. Then stairs are installed and the floor strengthened.

Dormer: A very popular type of flat-roof extension projecting vertically from the slope of the roof, which creates extra head height and improves usable floor space.

Mansard: By replacing one or both slopes of the roof with a very steep side and placing a flat roof on top, the loft space benefits from more head height and volume.

Hip to gable: Popular on end-of-terrace or semi-detached properties, the work will extend the side roof area so the hipped (or sloping) side which formerly sloped inwards becomes a vertical wall.

Modular: This style of extension is used where the existing loft space is unsuitable for conversion. Instead, a new 'modular' room is designed and made off-site, before the existing roof is removed and replaced with the new structure.

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Adding a dormer extension to this loft provided the additional floor area needed for a sufficiently sized ensuite master bedroom in this end-of-terrace house in Morden, Surrey. Designed by Econoloft, it features space-saving fitted storage, skylights, and a Juliet balcony with French-style doors. A similar dormer extension and conversion would cost around £45,000.



Check if you're covered by permitted development

The good news first – loft conversions don't normally require planning permission, as most fall under permitted development (PD). However, you will need to apply to your local authority for permission if you extend or alter the roof space and doing so exceeds limits and conditions set out for your property type or the area you live in.

The PD limits state:

- The total volume of additional roof space must not exceed 40 cubic metres for terraced houses and 50 cubic metres for detached or semi-detached houses, including any previous roof alterations
- Any extension must not exceed the plane of the existing roof slope facing the highway and must not be higher than the highest part of the roof
- Materials must be similar in appearance to the existing house
- Side-facing windows should be 1.7m above the floor and feature obscured glazing
- No verandas, balconies or raised platforms are allowed
- Apart from hip-to-gable ones, roof extensions must be set back at least 20cm from the original eaves
- The roof extension must not overhang the wall of the original house

PD will not apply if you live in a flat, maisonette, listed building, converted property, Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, World Heritage site, or in a Conservation Area. It also does not cover designs exceeding the stated restrictions. In these cases you'll need to make a formal planning application. When your plans do fall within PD, it's worth asking the local authority for a Certificate of Lawful Development to ensure you're covered.

When planning your project, take a look around your neighbourhood to see if any lofts have been converted on your street or on similar properties. If so, it's likely yours will be allowed too. Whether you need permission or not, you'll need to get a Party Wall Agreement in place with any neighbouring houses before any work starts.



The owner of this home in Richmond, south-west London, wanted to create two additional bedrooms and a bathroom, so designers at Simply Loft suggested a rear dormer extension. The old roof was removed and replaced with the dormer, boosting the internal space, and a new staircase was fitted in keeping with the style of the first floor stairs. Simple in style, the completed conversion houses a new master ensuite bedroom and bedroom/home office. The conversion cost around £54,000.



Don't forget about building regulations

By converting the loft, you're changing its use into a 'liveable space', which means it needs building regulations approval by a qualified building control inspector. The regulations cover matters of structural safety, energy efficiency and electrics, access and fire safety, including the strength of the floor, roof and wall stability, insulation, drainage, door and window efficiency, and the placement and style of the stairs. "While the position of stairs depends on the house type and available space, the staircase should ideally be placed in the middle or side of the floorplan," explains Sergio Olave from TW10 Architects. "This would potentially allow for a room to the front, one to the rear and access to a bathroom from that landing. However, for a single bedroom with an ensuite, the best place would be to continue the natural progression of the existing stair below straight into the bedroom space, often along the roof ridge." Wherever placed, the stairs must have a minimum of 2m head height with a maximum 220mm step rise and maximum 220mm depth. They also have to form part of an escape route in case of fire. There must also be a fire door, which is often best placed at the bottom so it doesn't interfere with room flow.

Improve insulation and ventilation

"You should take the opportunity to boost levels of insulation and make your home more energy efficient when converting your loft," says Robert Wood, founder of Simply Loft. "Not only will this create a more comfortable living environment, but sufficient insulation is required to meet building regulations – and it could help save money on bills." A key objective is to ensure you maintain a comfortable temperature all year, so a balance between good insulation and sufficient ventilation is vital – especially in a bathroom, where moisture levels are high. "Building regulations cover a minimum level of insulation, which is usually adequate, but you may wish to consider other options depending on how you will use your loft – a music room may require extra for sound proofing, for example," says Sarah Livesey from Econoloft. You'll need wall, roof and floor insulation. Ask your designer or builder for advice specific to your needs.

Need to know: Check your roof type

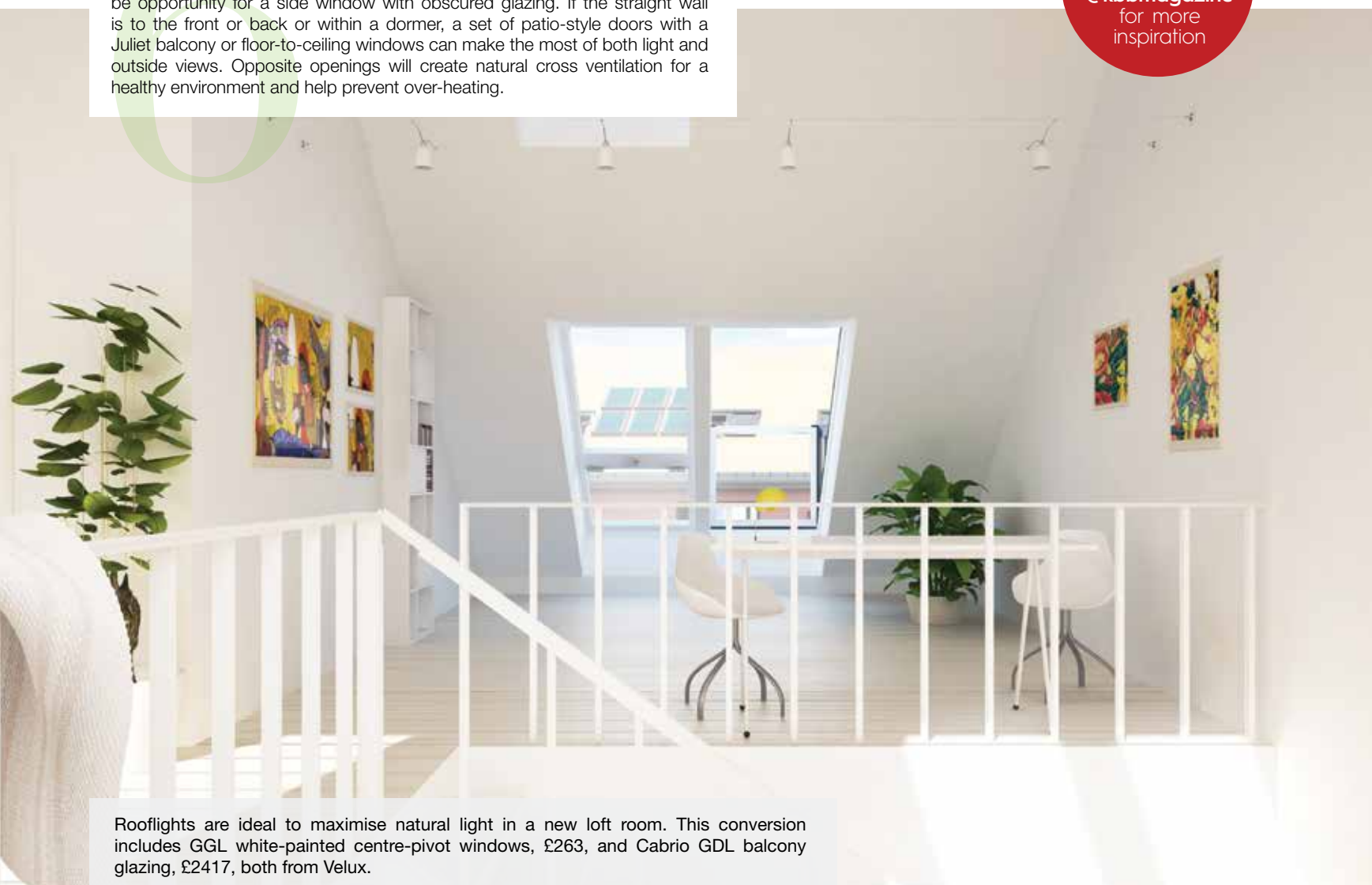
Yours will either be a 'cut and pitched' roof, which is common on older properties or a 'trussed' roof, which you're more likely to find on a modern build. Loft conversions are possible on both trussed or pitched roofs, but a trussed design can prove costlier as there is generally additional support required.

Let in the light

You'll need to plan for new window openings in your loft conversion, as there will be none existing. Rooflights are the best option, and best placed either side of the roof pitch, if possible, for maximum daylight, or just to one side. For conversions with straight walls, for example in a hip-to-gable, there may be opportunity for a side window with obscured glazing. If the straight wall is to the front or back or within a dormer, a set of patio-style doors with a Juliet balcony or floor-to-ceiling windows can make the most of both light and outside views. Opposite openings will create natural cross ventilation for a healthy environment and help prevent over-heating.



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Rooflights are ideal to maximise natural light in a new loft room. This conversion includes GGL white-painted centre-pivot windows, £263, and Cabrio GDL balcony glazing, £2417, both from Velux.

Decide on your layout

A loft is the ideal place for an ensuite master bedroom or, depending on its size and whether you plan to extend the footprint, a kitchen. Bear in mind fitting a kitchen or bathroom will require additional plumbing, so plan this in early. Decide on the exact room layout, down to the location of furniture and storage, well before any construction begins, so you can plan the location of the plumbing and electrics. Don't forget smaller details like plug sockets and light switches, including how many you'll need and whether you'd like the lighting to be on different circuits, so you can control zones for task lighting and ambience. If you're planning an ensuite bedroom, you may like to have dimmed low-level lighting in the bathroom for late-night trips to the loo. Also take note of where the eaves slope and utilise this space effectively. For example, avoid placing the shower, basin, or cooking areas in parts with limited head height.

Hire the right team

There are a few options when getting help with your redesign. An architect or architectural technologist (find one at architecture.com or ciat.org.uk) can produce bespoke drawings which in turn can be used to create a tender document to hire builders, plumbers and electricians as well as a structural engineer. Many architects will be able to recommend tradespeople they've previously worked with. But each will charge individual fees. You may prefer hiring an all-in-one design-and-build contractor who will take on the entire project for an all-inclusive price. For a simple rooflight conversion, you may be able to work with a builder on the plans, hire a plumber, electrician and decorator separately, and project manage yourself depending on how comfortable you feel. Always check any contractors are part of a trade association, purchase site insurance to cover your property from any potential damage, and seek at least three quotes for any trade or designer before hiring.