

Before you buy or build

Site considerations

The cost of building a house can be affected by the nature of the site. It is wise to investigate the suitability of the site before selecting a block of land.

When choosing a block

When selecting a block of land to meet your requirements, you might:

- choose the block of land on your own;
- employ a qualified professional to help you select the block of land after discussing your design requirements; or
- select a house and land package through a builder.

You should consider:

- the location (including budget, closeness to schools, shops, transport and other facilities);
- access to services such as electricity, water, gas, sewer and telephone (and the cost and time it would take to connect to these utilities);
- where the sun rises and sets, and climatic conditions;
- the plans for the area, especially if the block is part of a development; and
- the nature and condition of the site (sitework costs and whether the work will affect other land).

Nature of the site

On sites with low lying land or uniform land containing soils that are partly or entirely clay, silt or peat, you may have to remove unsuitable foundation soils and import fill, or carry out special work to establish a sound foundation.

The cost of concrete footings and slabs can increase due to the need for additional concrete and reinforcement when unstable site soil conditions are discovered.

An unstable foundation does not provide adequate support to the building structure and allows differential settlement to occur. This may result in cracked house slabs and walls.

The planting of certain trees and shrubs in the vicinity of the house can severely effect the moisture content of the ground. This change, together with the tree roots, may cause cracking in the slab or the masonry of the house.

Site conditions

Land features (or site conditions) can affect the price of building and the layout or design of the house that may be built. Site conditions will have an impact on the cost of building, as it affects the amount of preparation (or site works) required to lay the foundations for the house.

Site conditions include:

- the type of soil;
- how the soil is distributed across the block;
- water table height; and
- any trees or rock contained in the soil.

Some of these factors can be assessed before you build.

Do I need a site investigation?

Site investigations should be carried out before entering into a building contract.

A builder, architect, engineer or independent consultant may carry out the investigation to provide an accurate appraisal of the structural requirements and the eventual site work costs.

Sitework costs

When entering into a building contract there is likely to be a 'provisional sum' for site works.

A 'provisional sum' is a sum of money set aside in a contract to provide for the scope and cost of work that cannot be clearly foreseen.

Where the home building work contract is valued between \$7,500 and \$500,000, the provisional sum cannot be less than the minimum amount it would reasonably cost to perform the work.

The builder should only estimate the costs after carrying out a reasonable inspection of the site, as penalties apply for understating costs (section 12 of the *Home Building Contracts Act 1991*).

When purchasing a block of land, be aware of the approximate site costs to include in your building budget.

Work affecting other land

Any site works or building which adversely impacts an adjacent property requires the consent of adjoining owners.

Work adversely affecting other land includes:

- changing the natural site drainage in a way that reduces the effectiveness of drainage, or affects buildings or structures on adjoining land; and
- reducing the stability or load bearing capacity of adjoining land, or a building or structure on the land.

Further information

Building and Energy may assist with queries or disputes regarding site works. Call 1300 489 099.

The CSIRO produces a publication 'Foundation Maintenance and Footing Performance: A Homeowner's Guide' that is available at www.publish.csiro.au or call 1300 788 000.

Building and health officers at the relevant local government may provide information about development restrictions.

Checklist

Before buying a block of land or building a house you should:

- ☐ Speak to the vendor or selling agent to obtain information about any encumbrances on the land title that may adversely effect further development.
- ☐ Seek the services of a qualified professional to ascertain whether site conditions may affect what can be built on the block.
- ☐ Consider the impact of the proposed siteworks and building on any adjacent property.
- ☐ Contact the local government regarding development restrictions.



**Department of Local Government,
Industry Regulation and Safety**
www.lgirs.wa.gov.au

Regional Offices:

Goldfields/Esperance	(08) 9021 9494
Great Southern	(08) 9842 8366
Kimberley	(08) 9191 8400
Mid West	(08) 9920 9800
North West	(08) 9185 0900
South West	(08) 9722 2888

Building and Energy Division

Level 1 Mason Bird Building
303 Sevenoaks Street
(entrance Grose Avenue)
Cannington Western Australia 6107
Locked Bag 14, Cloisters Square
Perth WA 6850

Call: 1300 489 099

Email: be.info@lgirs.wa.gov.au

www.lgirs.wa.gov.au/building-and-energy

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