

# GRAND DESIGNS



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The official magazine of the hit TV series

TV HOUSE EXCLUSIVE

## THE ECO HOME

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PLUS  
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**Devon** Four-bedroom house with good transport connections and close to beaches and Dartmoor, £625,000, Marchand Petit (01548 831 163; marchandpetit.co.uk)



**South Cambridgeshire** Three-bedroom new-build barn in a village location close to the A1 and Cambridge, £650,000, Savills (01223 347 147; savills.co.uk)



**Banbury, Oxfordshire** Four-bedroom house with top schools nearby and a one-hour commute to central London, £785,000, Strutt & Parker (01295 672 099; struttandparker.com)

## LOCATION MATTERS

When it comes to places to live, what makes one area more desirable than another? **Words Zoe Dare Hall**

**W**e tend to think about our local council only when something goes wrong: the rubbish isn't being collected; it's a struggle to get children into the best school, or there's an issue with the council tax bill. But if we take council to mean the community in which we live, what makes one area of the country better than another? And how do you choose the place in which you'll be happiest?

A mountain of quality of life surveys offer some assistance. *The Daily Telegraph* recently ranked 7,137 areas of England and Wales based on health, economic, home ownership and crime statistics and came up with Hampshire's Test Valley as the best place to live.

Pick a different survey and you'll get a different answer. Solihull comes top in Uswitch's *Quality of Life Index*, ranking highly for working hours, comfortable salaries and life expectancy. And St Bees in Cumbria – which has above average education, low crime and good salaries compared with property prices – wins gold in the *Family Hotspots Report 2014* from Family Investments.

Some places are regulars in such surveys. Wokingham in Berkshire crops up frequently, as does Lancashire's Ribble Valley. Towns in the North and Midlands dominate Family Investments' findings this year, with small market towns on the M6 corridor between Birmingham and Manchester offering an attractive cocktail of economic and lifestyle factors.

But what we regard as important in a location will depend entirely on the stage we're at in life. Young professionals care about proximity to work, social life, good – and affordable – transport and leisure facilities. In a recent poll

by Lloyds TSB, this demographic voted Wandsworth in South London as their favourite place to live in England, known for its good sports facilities, such as Tooting Bec lido, the lowest crime levels in inner London and, when the time's right, great schools. It also has the second lowest council tax in the capital.

Older downsizers may seek good healthcare and public transport, affordable property and perhaps a coastal or country location. For that, Sharon Thatcher at Strutt & Parker's Morpeth office (01670 516 123; struttandparker.com) recommends the Northumberland coast. 'We have exceptional train and road links, an expanding international airport with popular daily flights to Dubai and new direct flights to New York, and our health provision is to be enhanced with a new £200million specialist emergency hospital,' she says.

Families, meanwhile, will be glued to Ofsted reports as they struggle to juggle house prices with school league tables – the website Locrating (locrating.com) is a useful way to see property for sale near outstanding schools. Also on the family agenda are parks, safe playgrounds and easy commuter links to nearby cities.

In search of family friendly and affordable places, Savills (savills.co.uk) came up with Rushcliffe, within an easy commute of Nottingham, as its number one spot. It says it's the top-rated local authority in England and Wales and the average three-bed house costs just £175,000. Also high on its list were the Ribble Valley (again), Eden in Cumbria and

Broadland in Norfolk. South Cambridgeshire and Sevenoaks also rank highly.

London generally suffers in quality of life surveys because the work/life balance is hard to achieve when house prices are so high. Yet some of London's wealthiest neighbourhoods have the lowest council tax in the country – Westminster is the cheapest, up to £1,000 a year less than some London boroughs. Pimlico, Fulham and Belgravia also pay less than many areas of England – though it's argued that Londoners pay in other ways, such as through stratospheric parking charges or, would you believe, charges in some boroughs for personal trainers and nannies to use local parks.

If you have a big building project in mind, you can't beat Runnymede council – which includes wealthy Virginia Water – for its 'exceptional planning department,' according to Alex Newall at Hanover Private Office (020 7935 5797; hanoverprivateoffice.com).

Darren Hunt at Carson & Co (01628 260 112; carsons.co.uk) nominates another royal borough, Windsor and Maidenhead, for its abundant river- and land-based sports, top-notch restaurants and (besides Eton) excellent schools, such as Holyport College, the country's first boarding free school. It's also on the handy M4/M40 corridor and will see Crossrail open in Maidenhead in 2018.

No one said finding your ideal home will be easy. But all these quality of life surveys should go some way to narrowing down your choice of location. **GD**

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