



Not long before Mack is back in town

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Taking care of that lawn

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'Realistic' prices tempt those first-time buyers

BY EDEL CAROLAN

A fresh wave of 'realistic' pricing on homes for sale looks set to welcome first-time buyers back on to Belfast's property ladder.

Last week we reported a leading city estate agent's advice for home-sellers to adopt realistic attitudes towards asking prices - a message which appears to be hitting home this week.

Trevor Dougan, director of BTWCairns, explained that a more reasonable approach to property prices across Belfast and beyond would underpin the current period of market recovery.

Mr Dougan said that while the market was experiencing a "steadier, more sustainable period", buyers can remain confident in the local market if they adopt a "realistic attitude towards price".

And as reported by online estate agency Rightmove this week, home-sellers have already begun a downward trend in asking prices.

A spokesperson for Rightmove said average asking prices have slipped by 0.1 per cent since March, a sign that a decade of house price inflation is finally coming to correction.

"Sellers have finally realised that a decade of rising prices has come to an end," explained Rightmove in its April house price index.

Rightmove's monthly price report said average asking prices have slipped from £239,655 in March to a marginally lower £239,521 now.

A recent Halifax house price index confirmed a decline in selling prices in the month of March, signalling an early upturn in buyers' prospects.

Heavily inflating house prices have underpinned a soaring local market, to the delight of sellers, but have pushed first-time buyers further from the North's property ladder.

As the mortgage market is now under pressure to pass on interest rate cuts and reintroduce many products, and with a sign of house prices stabilising, buyers are looking forward to brighter prospects for purchasing their first home.

Rightmove's commercial director said this week that buyers who may have previously felt discouraged from the market and have managed to save a deposit during recent



Market experts have this week welcomed a correction in house prices, and explained the steadying market is beginning to welcome first-time buyers back to the local property ladder

months are now poised to benefit from this correction.

"Buyers who have saved through the winter and are now emerging to enter the spring market will find there are deals to be had," explained Miles Shipside from Rightmove.

"It's a buyers' market, but only if that buyer is buying with cash or can put down a good deposit," he added.

Many local experts have said in recent weeks that 2008 will see better opportunities for buyers, which now

seems to be coming to fruition.

Several mortgage lenders have already begun to introduce new mortgage packages and a spokesperson for the Co-ownership scheme said this week the organisation is optimistic further funds will be made available later in the year.

Belfast Property also heard from North Belfast estate agent Colin Barkley last week, who explained how recently steadying prices are a positive sign that the city's housing

market will be more welcoming to first-time buyers in months to come.

He added that he expects steady prices to spark more activity and ultimately restore confidence in the local market.

"Ultimately, people still want to buy, so we expect to see more sales coming through, and more activity will eventually generate more confidence in the market," said Mr Barkley, who's with the Morton Pinpoint estate agency.

Investors set their sights on sunnier climes and real returns

MORE local property investors are buying into overseas 'property syndication' investments, a property agency revealed this week.

As the housing market here begins to stabilise and prices begin to show signs of steadying, many investors across the North are looking further afield and invest in property abroad - not forgetting the irresistible lure of sun, sand and lucrative investment deals, of course.

Michele McIlroy, co-managing director of Property Finders said a new trend is emerging with property investors looking to make maximum gains from the markets abroad.

The North Belfast property investment specialist explained syndicates are fast becoming the invest plan of choice for the North's eagle-eyed would-be property magnates.

"More and more people from Northern Ireland are joining syndicates to buy property which would normally be unaffordable as a single purchase," Michele explained this week.

The modern alternative to piling investment funds into a single property overseas involves "a group of like-minded investors coming together to invest in a specific project", according to Property Finders.

"We have found that property syndicates have become very popular," said Michele.

"The whole point of a syndicate is that a pool of investors can come together and invest in a specific project.

"Another attraction about the syndicate option is that it is Self Invested Personal Pension (SIPP) approved, allowing investors to maximise the return from their personal pensions," she added.

Fabulous France is one of the most desired overseas investment locations for local buyers, according to the experts.

A stable French market and attractive incentives, such as tax rebates, makes the cultural and holiday hotspot most attractive to buyers here in Belfast.

"France is very popular amongst our local buyers," said co-managing director Ross Gunning, who added that France has overtaken sunny Spain in the overseas investment stakes.

"Spain was a real hotspot in the 1980s but at the moment it is more suitable to people who want to own a holiday home rather than invest money in the hope of a short-term profit. The United States would fall into the same category," Ross added.