

Would you really like to spend the winter? The handsome brown bay? Well, baby, such far-flung destinations are a fantasy for many of us, but the good news is that you can easily make your home a welcoming sanctuary from the cold and rain.

We're all spending more time indoors. Restaurants are shutting as more of us choose to cook at home, and millennials prefer to 'tag up' on the sofa, creating their Instagram feeds, in comfy but crash-the-dream-to-try-to-lose-the-weight living rooms to even more intense when the days are short and temperatures are dropping.

Let the pressure on our living spaces to get going. How to keep part to high house prices and unaffordable rents, more than a quarter of those aged 20-34 still live at home with their parents - an all-time high, according to the Office for National Statistics. While this means we're more likely to be boozing by watching *F'n a Cuckoo* - as family, there are fewer ways to escape for some peace and quiet. Here's your guide to getting your living space ready for the winter - and Christmas - onslaught.

THINK ABOUT LAYOUT

An open-plan home may be a boon when you're entertaining in summer, or if you need to keep an eye on small children, but in other times it can be a pain - draughty, difficult to heat, and with no privacy or noise insulation.

"Open-plan means most occasions in one's home tend to centre on the living-kitchen area," says Jonathan Rowse, head of the buying solution, a property-finding agency. "Often, there are no escape routes for energetic toddlers, grumpy teenagers or grandparents who need a no-nonsense - and this can get tricky, especially at Christmas, when the extended family gather."

Use bookcases to partition large spaces, which should create a sense of enclosed rooms and delineate different areas with doors and screens, suggests Robert Bailey, founder of the open-plan buying agency. "This allows for separation and privacy, and the book will help to absorb some of the noise - as will a rug as a sound floor."

Screens get another popular option. And, if you have a hard time with curtains, consider putting up temporary soundproof curtains between rooms. "These could absorb the sound of a grandad's snoring or the kids' squabbling," says Nicholas Stockley, head of design and planning at the online architectural practice *Architects*. Meanwhile, side sound insulation curtains from *Oris* (www.orisinsulation.co.uk).

A larger term solution for owners with boomerang kids is a "breakdown-plan" layout, which has the light and serenity of open-plan living, but creates smaller pockets of space. "One great option is internal glazing," Stockley says. "It can be tricky, but an internal wall made from steel-framed glass looks stunning, allowing plenty of light through, but reducing noise and keeping heat in."

"Sliding pocket doors are also a good choice. With the mechanism hidden within a wall, they have minimal impact on a space, but offer lots of flexibility."

You can also huddle up your door to make it as inviting as possible. "Water is the first when you can get all out with having," says the interior design expert Alison Albert, who co-owns Emma Watson, Olivia Colman and the Vint in among her clients. "Drugs absorb quite everything for a layer of softness, and lots of gemstone glasses filled with rosemary, bay and thyme are something I do a lot - and keep on pillows and cushions. Themed and



LOUNGE WIZARDS

Boomerang kids, in-laws, party guests: as the nights draw in, our living rooms have to work a lot harder. *Alexandra Goss* asks the design experts how to create a serene sanctuary from the seasonal hustle and bustle



cushions are the perfect way to transition a space from season to season. "It gets a bad rap, but the one I use, Sams Marla Novelli, is made by the oldest pharmacy in the world, in Italy," she says. "It's a blend of organic herbs and spices collected in the Florence hills. When I put the key in the door, the scent is intoxicating - like stepping into an Italian home in the rain."

GET THE LIGHTING RIGHT
This is especially important on cyclical winter days and long, dark nights. "There's nothing worse than central lighting, so I like lots of table lamps around the room and candles in coloured glass holders," says Jack Laver, founder, the antique dealer and interior decorator known to Instagrammers as *gritandchop*.

For what bulbs to buy to avoid that harsh glow? "The light is warm in colour, so you want to replace that too," says Paul Nulty, founder of the Nulty lighting design practice. "Overhead lights this may be difficult if you have LEDs, but can be remedied by changing the dimmer switch. If you want bulbs to create a warm glow, you need to look for a low colour temperature as possible. Aim for somewhere between 2,000 and 2,700 kelvin." As a reference point, candlelight is 1,800K.

"You should also check bulbs for the colour-rendering index (CRI). The reason (cables, foundation or hair highlights) look fine in the shop or salon, but appear totally different when you get home or even step outside, is that the lights are not revealing the colours faithfully in comparison with an ideal or natural light source," Nulty says. "The higher the CRI, the better the colour rendering - ideally, you want a CRI of 90-plus." Most

Great indoors
Main image: layered textures to a design by Top Interiors. Above: a Fat Penguin woodburner (£1,599; huldoovoves.com.uk). Left: stop draughts with Blackout blinds. Facing page, bottom left: Pam Peppin Garland (£18; [loaf.com](http://harmadhome.com) and Dixie sofa in white plush velvet (£2,145; <a href=)) fabric available from February

COSY UP YOUR OPEN-PLAN

THE PROBLEM

Linda Peters lives in a detached 1920s house in Kent. The previous owners made one large living area by knocking the two downstairs rooms into one. It is entered from the hall via a door placed centrally, with a large fireplace jutting into the room, directly opposite - because of this arrangement, the living room still feels like two separate spaces. This is fine when it's just Linda and her husband there, but when they have company, they end up with separate groups at each end. The room has two windows on the side wall and a large bay window at the front. Linda is looking for ideas to make it more harmonious space.

THE SOLUTION

It's notoriously difficult to find satisfactory furniture configurations for long living rooms, the proportions of Linda's, and the problems they cause for the layout, are only exacerbated by the central door and fireplace. The conventional furniture doesn't help, either: six has three sofas, three next tables, two sideboards, a shelving unit, a dresser, a TV cabinet and two corner cabinets. When designing layouts for such long rooms, I usually try to break the space into zones, starting with an area for sitting -



The Peterses' living room, above, doesn't work well when they have guests. Facing page, top: Pam Peppin Garland (£18; harmadhome.com) and Dixie sofa in white plush velvet (£2,145; loaf.com) fabric available from February



the visual and acoustic properties of TV viewing and conversation table to set the ideal size. Any leftover space can then be zoned as a reading or library area.

Option A involves moving one of the sofas to sit in a dividing transverse arrangement near the fire, the sitting area is reduced and focused on the right-hand side of the room - much more conducive to group gatherings. Beyond this sofa, a new zone is created, it's large enough for a sideboard to be placed behind the sofa, with an smother behind that, and for the end wall to be treated with shelving, dining away with dressers, sideboards and cabinets. A window seat could also be incorporated, creating an ideal reading area.

Option B is to embrace the fireplace (central position) and place a couple of armchairs and a coffee table on a rug in front of the fire. When the room is occupied by only two people, this would make a cozy winter sitting area. For larger gatherings, the armchairs can be turned to face the sofas on the right-hand side. A shelving unit sits at a room divider behind this, an area is created that could work as a reading space, or as before, low-height storage could be installed, greatly increasing shelf space over installing a non-adjustable study desk.

Linda is open to changing the fireplace as part of any solution. The chimney breast is angled, which, although unusual, is not

offensive. Updating the materials for the surround and hearth would really improve it. The timber could be replaced with a simple marble mantel shelf, with a concealed bracket for support. The back and hearth could then be tiled.

KEY TIP
I encourage clients to have a flexible attitude to furniture arrangements, as this can lead to greatly improved room layouts. Linda's sofas all have their backs to walls, which renders comfortable use of the space.

High street bulbs don't hit CRI, so be suggest a manufacturer such as Tala (tala.co.uk) or Sams (sams.com).

DON'T OVERLOOK THE OBVIOUS
Why do you hardly ever see curtains on Instagram? Architects and designers have them because they block light from the windows, even when open, but they are highly practical for privacy and warmth in winter - especially if you have thermal linings.

For smaller windows or skylights, consider blackout blinds. Ros Oat's models effectively form a seal between the glass and the frame, which the company claims will cut draughts by up to 87%. Issued on an average three-bedroom house, there's even a fabric-changing feature, so you can swap the design in the spring (from £4). blackblinds.co.uk.

Make your own draught excluders from old fabric and well-washed rice, suggests Sarah Biron, co-founder of the DIY home Club (diyhomeclub.com). "Cheap coverage for bedrooms can help keep out the cold," she says, "while a Christmas tree will block draughts from an opened fireplace." Brian DG, chimney-sweep UK.

BE PREPARED
"When I was a child, someone always seemed to own a house big enough to accommodate all the family every Christmas, but now that is unlikely," says Sud Empson, director of Hartingson buying agency. "So now has to gather the no beds, sofa beds and extra pillows in advance. We have a glorified shed in our garden where we will put my brother's vintage boys - they can stagger off there in a disaster zone."

If you need a sofa bed, firms such as Loaf are still selling ready-made sofas with delivery in time for Christmas - if space is tight, they come in ottoman-style boxes. "To make sure a sofa bed is up to the job, check that it has a solid base frame held together with screws and dowels - not glued and stapled chipboard variants, which break easily," says Charlie Marshall, founder of Loaf. "You also want to ensure they have sturdy mechanisms and are easy to manoeuvre."

Get in supplies for the woodburner (Linda leaves the debris over whether it's killing you for another day). Stack logs away from the heat chamber to avoid accidental catches. Phil Howard, country manager for the UK and Ireland at the stove manufacturer Corran, recommends a minimum of 30cm from the side and a metre in front. If you don't have - or want - an open fire or woodburner, Nellie's Fireplace for Your Home programme reduces the effect, right down to cracking sound effects.

Prepare for all the extra winter conversations with a 32in fire window covering (32in; huldoovoves.com) and consider investing in a dehumidifier. "You might also want to keep a pair of noise-canceling headphones handy, to save a toddler needs a nap or the grandparents insist on a no-nonsense in the middle of the room," says Caroline Edwards, partner at Carter James interior agency in Suffolk.

And if all that doesn't put you to bed, better distractions! James Greenwood, a director at the buying agency Sotheby's Property Search, has a simple solution. "Many families have Santa get their heads round the fact that the best open bedroom is the 18th top the best."



Great indoors
Main image: layered textures in a design by **Tor Interiors**. Above, a **Fat Penguin woodburner (£1,599; ludlowstoves.co.uk)**. Left, stop draughts with **BlocOut blinds**. Facing page, bottom left, **Pom Pom garland (£15; hurmandhurn.com)** and **Dixie sofa in Merlot plush velvet (£2,145; loaf.com; fabric available from February)**

cushions are the perfect way to transition a space from season to season.”

Ahern also swears by potpourri. “It gets a bad rap, but the one I use, Santa Maria Novella, is made by the oldest pharmacy in the world, in Italy,” she says. “It’s a blend of organic herbs and spices collected in the Florentine hills. When I put the key in the door, the scent is intoxicating – like stepping into an Italian forest in the rain.”

GET THE LIGHTING RIGHT

This is especially important on crepuscular winter days and long, dark nights.

“There’s nothing worse than central lighting, so I like lots of table lamps around the room and candles in coloured glass holders,” says Jack Laver Brister, the antiques dealer and interior decorator known to Instagrammers as @tradchap.

But what bulbs to buy to avoid that harsh glare? “Firelight is warm in colour, so you want to replicate that feel,” says Paul Nulty, founder of the Nulty lighting design practice. “Dim overhead lights – this may be difficult if you have LEDs, but can be remedied by changing the dimmer switch. If you want bulbs to create a warm glow, you need to look for as low a colour temperature as possible. Aim for somewhere between 2,200 and 2,700 kelvin.” As a reference point, candlelight is 1,800K.

You should also check bulbs for the colour rendering index (CRI). “The reason clothes, foundation or hair highlights look fine in the shop or salon, but appear totally different when you get home or even step outside, is that the lights are not revealing the colours faithfully in comparison with an ideal or natural light source,” Nulty says. “The higher the CRI, the better the colour rendering – ideally, you want a CRI of 90-plus.” Most

high-street bulbs don’t list CRI, so he suggests a manufacturer such as Tala (tala.co.uk) or Soraa (soraa.com).

DON’T OVERLOOK THE OBVIOUS

Why do you hardly ever see curtains on Instagram? Architects and designers hate them because they block light from the window, even when open, but they are hugely practical for privacy and warmth in winter – especially if you have thermal linings.

For smaller windows or skylights, consider blackout blinds. BlocOut’s models effectively form a seal between the glass and the room, which the company claims will cut draughts by up to 43%, based on an average three-bedroom home. There’s even a fabric-changing feature, so you can swap the design in the spring (from £41; blocblinds.co.uk).

Make your own draught excluders from old fabric and bulk-bought rice, suggests Steph Bron, co-founder of the DIY Doers Club (thediadoers.com). “Cheap coverings for letterboxes can help keep out the cold,” she says, “while a Chimney Sheep will block draughts from an unused fireplace [from £16; chimneysheep.co.uk].”

Winter is all about muddy walks, so make sure you have doormats on both sides of external doors. Finally, if you want to free up space in your sitting room, try putting the Christmas tree in the hallway. “This also means you get to see it more often in the run-up to December 25,” says the interior designer Annabelle Everard, founder of Annabelle Holland.

BE PREPARED

“When I was a child, someone always seemed to own a house big enough to accommodate all the family easily for Christmas, but now that is unlikely,” says Saul Empson, director of Haringtons buying agency. “So one has to gather blow-up beds, sofa beds and extra pillows in advance. We have a glorified shed in our garden where we will put my brother’s teenage boys – they can stagger off there in a drunken stupor.”

If you need a sofa bed, firms such as Loaf are still selling ready-made ones with delivery in time for Christmas – if space is tight, they come in ottoman-style boxes. “To make sure a sofa bed is up to the job, check that it has a solid beech frame held together with screws and dowels – not glued and stapled chipboard versions, which break easily,” says Charlie Marshall, founder of Loaf. “You also want to ensure they have sturdy mechanisms and are easy to manoeuvre.”

Get in supplies for the woodburner. (Let’s leave the debate over whether it’s killing you for another day.) Stack logs well away from the heat chamber to avoid accidental catches – Phil Wood, country manager for the UK and Ireland at the stove manufacturer Contura, recommends a minimum of 50cm from the side and a metre in front. If you don’t have – or want – an open fire or woodburner, Netflix’s Fireplace for Your Home programme recreates the effect, right down to crackling sound effects.

Prepare for all the extra winter condensation with a Kärcher window vacuum (£35; johnlewis.com) and consider investing in a dehumidifier. “You might also want to keep a pair of noise-cancelling headphones handy, in case a toddler needs a nap or the grandparents insist on a snooze in the middle of the action,” says Caroline Edwards, partner at Carter Jonas estate agency in Suffolk.

And if all that doesn’t put an end to festive frustration? James Greenwood, a director at the buying agency Stacks Property Search, has a simple solution: “Many families have finally got their heads round the fact that the best spare bedroom is the B&B up the road.”

COSY UP YOUR OPEN-PLAN

THE PROBLEM

Linda Pearce lives in a detached 1920s house in Kent. The previous owners made one large living area by knocking the two downstairs rooms into one. It is entered from the hall via a door placed centrally, with a large fireplace jutting into the room directly opposite – because of this arrangement, the living room still feels like two separate spaces. This is fine when it’s just Linda and her husband there, but when they have company, they end up with separate groups at each end.

The room has two windows on the side wall and a large bay window at the front. Linda is looking for ideas to make it a more harmonious space.

THE SOLUTION

It’s notoriously difficult to find satisfactory furniture configurations for long living rooms; the proportions of Linda’s, and the problems they cause for the layout, are only exacerbated by the central door and fireplace. The conventional furniture doesn’t help, either: she has three sofas, three nest tables, two sideboards, a shelving unit, a dresser, a TV cabinet and two corner cabinets.

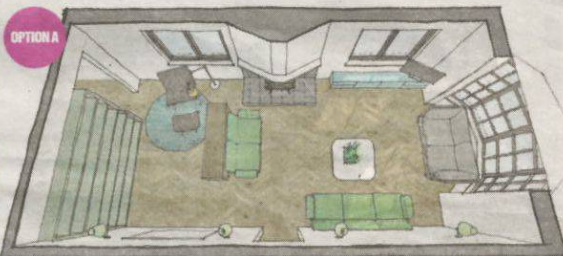
When designing layouts for such long rooms, I usually try to break the space into zones, starting with an area for sitting –



The Pearces’ living room, above, doesn’t work well when they have guests. Greg Toon has come up with two new layouts

the visual and acoustic properties of TV viewing and conversation tend to set the ideal size. Any leftover space can then be zoned as a reading or library area.

Option A involves moving one of the sofas to sit in a dividing, transverse arrangement near the fire; the sitting area is reduced and focused on the right-hand side of the room – much more conducive to group gatherings. Beyond this sofa, a new zone is created; it’s large enough for a sideboard to be placed behind the sofa, with an armchair beyond that, and for the end wall to be covered with shelving, going away with dressers, sideboards and cabinets. A window seat could also be incorporated, creating an ideal reading area.



Option B is to embrace the fireplace’s central position and place a couple of armchairs and a coffee table on a rug in front of the fire. When the room is occupied by only two people, this would make a cosy winter sitting area. For larger gatherings, the armchairs can be turned to face the sofas on the right-hand side. A shelving unit acts as a room divider; behind this, an area is created that could work as a reading space, or, as before, full-height storage could be installed, greatly increasing shelf space or even housing a concealable study desk.

Linda is open to changing the fireplace as part of any redesign. The chimney breast is angled, which, although unusual, is not

offensive. Updating the materials for the surround and hearth would really improve it. The timber could be replaced with a simple marble mantel shelf, with a concealed bracket for support. The back and hearth could then be tiled.

KEY TIP

I encourage clients to have a flexible attitude to furniture arrangements, as this can lead to greatly improved room layouts. Linda’s sofas all have their backs to walls, which hinders comfortable use of the space.

VERDICT

“Thank you for taking a look at my problem,” Linda says. “I like option A and will try to replicate it with some small changes. We have had the room replastered and painted, including the bricks on the fireplace, so it looks better now.”

Greg Toon is the founder of Potential etc..., which specialises in making the most of unloved spaces; potentialetc.com. Do you need Greg’s help? Email property@sunday-times.co.uk