

'ONE OF THE WORST EXPERIENCES OF MY LIFE'

Ness Bara 38, nutrition student

About 18 months ago, Ness moved into nurses' accommodation, while looking for a new house. The experience was one of the worst of her life. Her family hired a van, thinking this would save her money, and promised to help her move. It took a whole weekend working early to late, including three trips to take most of her stuff to her parents for storage, and another trip to move the rest to her second-floor room at the nurses' home – which had no lift. Four months later she moved again: 'I stood my ground and hired two men and a van to move from the nurses' home and got a firm who were local to my parents to move my stored stuff a couple of days later. It was a dream in comparison and the total cost was about the same as the van hire/petrol that awful weekend. I would never do it myself again!'

Contacts

British Association of Removers (Bar)
01923 699480; www.bar.co.uk

The National Guild of Removers and Storers (NGRS)

01494 792279; www.ngrs.co.uk

The Removals Industry Ombudsman Scheme

01442 891736
www.removalsombudsman.org.uk

Perfect moves

Ringling around removal firms can save hundreds of pounds



Later this month, Prime Minister Tony Blair will call in the removal men as he and his family move out of Downing Street and make the short trip across London to a new £3.5 million home. While Mr Blair may not spend long ringing round for removal quotes, doing so could save him hundreds of pounds.

We called 299 removal firms across the UK for an estimate on moving from a three- to a two-bed house two miles away. Prices varied more than £1,000 within the same region. Some companies said they'd need to visit the property to give a firm quote (this should be free), but we provided as much detail as possible to get reliable estimates. Where companies gave a price range, we used the mid-point for comparison.

Pricey Pickfords

Our proposed move cost £385 on average across the UK, including insurance and packing boxes. Bigger houses and/or larger distances will increase costs. Our move assumed that you'd pack and unpack boxes yourself. Firms often charge extra (typically £100 to £250) to do this.

Pickfords, the UK's biggest removal company, was the most expensive with an average UK estimate of £863 (though its prices often varied widely within the same area). Its highest estimate was £1,404 in East Anglia, where the next most expensive firm was £677 and the regional average, £463.

A Pickfords spokeswoman said it aims to give accurate verbal estimates so customers aren't surprised by a later formal quote. She added that its estimates were maybe above average but not to the extent seen in our survey. The company recommends it visits a home to give an accurate quote for a move this size.

Two other chains, White & Co and Bishops Move, gave estimates about £50 higher than the national average of all firms. Local independents were usually cheapest.

Most expensive was London and the Southeast at an average of £525 (ranging from £236 to £1,397). The lowest average was in the Northwest at £292.

Shift yourself

A good way to keep the cost down?

Moving yourself can be cheaper and more convenient, especially for small moves and short distances and you won't have to fit in with a removal firm's deadlines.

Three in ten people in our member survey handled their own

move, but there were mixed feelings about the experience. Some thought it was worth it, but others disliked the hassle (see 'One of the worst experiences of my life', above).

We estimate that the typical contents of a one-bedroomed flat

would fit into a Ford Transit Luton Tail Lift van for 24 hours. This costs about £100 (plus petrol) from Hertz but you may find a quote for a cheaper van elsewhere.

You'll have to arrange your own packaging materials and insurance for your belongings in transit. Many removal firms

will provide both as part of their quote.



Where companies go wrong

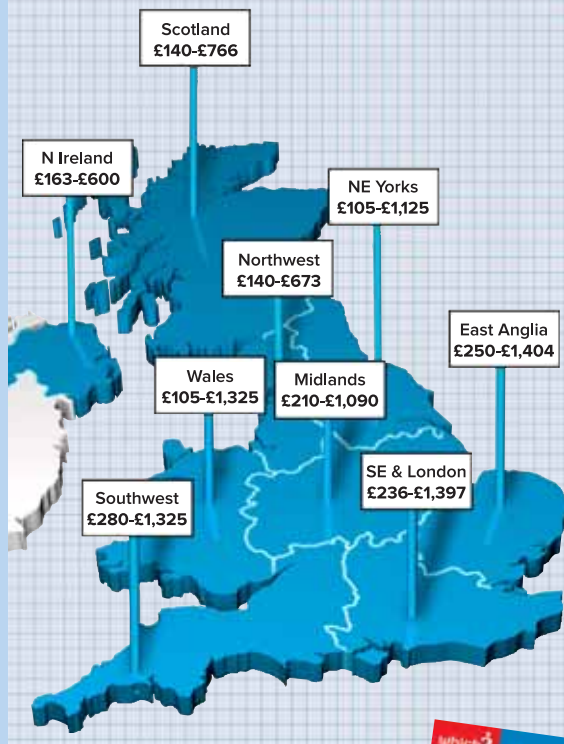
We spoke to 589 Which? members who had moved home in the last two years. More than 400 used professionals and four in ten had problems. The main issues included broken or damaged items, a van that was too small and damage to buildings.

The biggest trade bodies – the British Association of Removers (Bar) and the National Guild of Removers and Storers (NGRS) – have member lists on their websites. The firms display the trade-body logos in their ads in *Yellow Pages*. Firms belonging to a trade body gave estimates £100 more expensive on average for our move but should stick to the body's code of practice.

Four out of ten people who used professional removers faced problems

REMOVAL ESTIMATES BY REGION

We found that big chains were most expensive in the nine UK regions in our survey



HELP WITH YOUR MOVE

£1 off Which? book

Make your move as painless as possible... From dealing with estate agents to chasing solicitors, working out the true cost of moving to understanding home information packs (Hips), *Buy, Sell and Move House* is a practical handbook for anyone caught in a chain. This new edition includes July 2006 changes on Hips. We're offering it for £8.99 (£1 off RRP, with free P&P). To order your copy, call 01903 828557 or email mailorders@lbtld.co.uk and quote BSMW0607 and ISBN 978 1 84490 030 5.



Tips for a stress-free move

When you've found a property

■ Try getting quotes from companies near both ends of the journey. Which? member Vic Attwood said: 'When I moved from Sussex 18 months ago, getting quotes from companies near my new property in Inverness, rather than restricting myself to quotes from Sussex-based companies, saved me £750.'

■ Get quotes from at least three removal companies (allow time for them to visit your house).

■ Give the company clear details of what needs doing (for example, dismantling furniture), so that it will send the right van and the right number of people.

Got a completion date?

■ Book your firm or hire van early, especially to move on Friday – the most popular completion day. Only eight companies said they charge more for a Friday move.

■ You'll need buildings insurance on both homes to cover damage to the property, and insurance to cover your belongings in transit. The removal firm may include cover as part of your quote or for an extra fee. Your contents insurance is likely to have an option to cover personal possessions outside your house.

■ Even if you have this cover, you may need to extend it to include replacement costs. You don't want a repeat of the story when removal men dropped a £45,000 piano that was insured for only £25,000 (pictured right).

■ Many councils collect old furniture (they may charge a fee), but you could try selling it

at a car boot sale or on eBay (www.ebay.co.uk), or giving it away on a site such as www.freecycle.org to anyone who's able to collect it, or to a charity.

■ Websites such as www.boxshop.uk.com and www.bigbrownbox.co.uk sell strong, double-walled boxes. Moving packs cost from about £35 for a selection to move the contents of a small flat, to more than £100 for a large family home. Delivery is next working day.

If something goes wrong

1 Go through the firm's complaints procedure. Keep a record of written and telephone communications.

2 If the firm doesn't resolve matters to your satisfaction, you can complain to Bar or NGRS if the company is a member. NGRS members must also belong to the Removals Industry Ombudsman Scheme, so you can complain there if necessary.

3 If your firm isn't a trade body member, or you're unhappy with the ombudsman's decision, you can take legal action.



OUR RESEARCH

In March, we called 299 firms for an estimate for a local, Thursday move from a three- to a two-bed house. If insurance and boxes weren't included, we asked what they'd cost and added this. Where

firms didn't provide them, we added a standard insurance cost (based on those we did have) of 14 per cent and £20 for boxes. We also invited 1,958 members of our online panel to answer a survey on moving. Thanks to the 589 who took part.