



4: Home buying

Executive Summary

- The UK home-buying process is expected to shift from a slow, fragmented, paper-heavy system to one that is far more digitally enabled, data-driven and coordinated end-to-end. Key changes include earlier verification of information, greater interoperability between participants, and wider use of automation to reduce delays, errors and transaction failures. While progress is uneven, the overall direction is towards faster completions, fewer fall-throughs and clearer, more timely information for all parties.
- **Why does it matter for people and society?**
Today's system is costly, stressful and unreliable: transactions routinely take around six months, around a third fail, and affordability pressures have locked millions out of homeownership. Improving the process matters because housing is a core social good. A faster, more transparent and trustworthy journey reduces wasted costs, emotional stress and inequality, while supporting mobility, financial wellbeing and confidence in the housing market.
- **Why does it matter for mutuals?**
Building societies and credit unions play a critical role in serving underserved and complex borrowers, but they cannot overcome system-wide frictions on their own. As the market modernises, digital capability becomes table stakes. Mutuals that fail to adapt risk being marginalised, while those that invest can reinforce their trusted status, deepen customer relationships and extend their relevance beyond traditional mortgage products.
- **What is the core strategic implication?**
The central strategic implication is the need for collective action and proactive adaptation. For mutuals, this means collaborating to shape shared infrastructure and standards, combining automation with human advice, and championing trust, inclusion and fair outcomes. Doing so positions the sector as a credible steward of a more efficient, inclusive and resilient home-buying system.



Context

Owning a home is a core aspiration for most people, yet achieving it in the UK remains a notoriously slow, stressful, and fragile process, with around six months on average from listing to completion.¹ By contrast, the United States typically closes a sale in roughly 2–3 months (~69 days), and some markets achieve even faster turnarounds.¹ For example, Dubai has demonstrated the potential for significantly faster transactions through a blockchain-based registry, with reported completion times in a matter of hours.²

The UK process also commonly falls apart: approximately one in three transactions collapses before completion, often due to broken chains or last-minute problems, costing buyers and sellers an estimated £1.5 billion in wasted expenses each year.³ Affordability and complexity compound the challenge. House prices and deposit requirements have risen to the extent that over two million potential first-time buyers have been “locked out” of the market since 2006.⁴ Those who do try to buy face a complex

journey involving multiple intermediaries. The process remains largely paper-based and siloed, and around 90 per cent of UK mortgages are arranged through brokers rather than directly with lenders, highlighting a persistent advice need for many households.⁵ This is a fragmented, multi-party process, with slow information flows and interdependent chains that entail limited legal commitment until late in the process. In June 2026 the UK Government announced a series of reforms, including upfront information packs and greater use of digitalisation and smart data that will move in this direction.

Building societies and credit unions play a critical role in serving underserved groups such as self-employed or older borrowers, but even their innovations cannot overcome the structural frictions embedded in the overall transaction process. Taken together, these issues amount to a clear burning platform for reimagining how homes are bought and sold.

Encouragingly, global innovations point the way forward. Other countries have demonstrated that home buying can be faster, safer, and more customer-friendly with effective technology and reforms:

- **Australia** – the PEXA electronic conveyancing platform, now used for over 85 per cent of property transfers nationwide.⁶
- **Dubai (UAE)** – a blockchain-enabled property registry supports fully digital transactions and significantly faster completions, with reported transaction times of only a few hours in some cases.²
- **Sweden** – a fully digital land registry, alongside blockchain-based pilots, has demonstrated the potential to materially reduce transaction and registration times compared with traditional paper-based systems.⁷



The trajectory is clear: home buying will become faster, more digital, and more customer-centric. For the UK, the question is how this transformation plays out by 2050. We explore two contrasting scenarios: one where technology and policy reforms combine to create a seamless, inclusive experience, and one where progress is uneven and benefits are not shared widely.

¹GB News (2024). UK branded worst in Europe for the time it takes to sell a home. ²Digital Dubai (2026); Dubai Land Department. Blockchain-enabled property transactions and real estate digitisation. ³Santander UK / Financial Reporter (2025). Failed housing transactions costing £1.5 billion a year. ⁴Building Societies Association (2025). Over two million first-time buyers missing from the housing market. ⁵FCA / UK Finance (latest available). Mortgage market data – broker channel share. ⁶PEXA Group; Today's Conveyancer (2022). Electronic conveyancing adoption in Australia. ⁷Lantmäteriet (Swedish Land Registry); Quartz (2022). Digital land registry and blockchain pilot programme.



Scenario 1 Seamless & Inclusive

The UK fixes the foundations including data standards, digital identity, conveyancing processes, and regulation so that technology delivers an end-to-end home-buying journey that is fast, trustworthy, and broadly inclusive.

A fully digital, end-to-end journey

By 2050, the entire home-buying process is integrated into a one-stop digital platform (or a network of interoperable platforms). From search to signing, everything happens in a coordinated online environment. Buyers can browse properties in immersive 3D, instantly access verified information (title, surveys, energy performance), and view personalised financing options alongside each property.

By the time a buyer is ready to make an offer, an AI-driven underwriting system has already processed their credit and income information, with their consent. As a result, multiple lenders including building societies have competed to provide instant pre-approvals, and the buyer can choose the most suitable rate and terms with confidence. Embedded finance becomes the norm: the mortgage is no longer a separate, opaque process.

Human advisers have not disappeared, but their role has changed. They are available on-demand for higher-value advice supporting complex decisions, family circumstances, or moments of uncertainty.

Super-fast transactions with smart contracts

Once a buyer and seller agree a price, smart contracts take over conveyancing and completion. Data and documentation are verified upfront, reducing delays. Even complex chains are coordinated digitally, eliminating the domino effect that causes transactions to collapse today.

Identity verification is instant through a national digital ID. Title checks run automatically against a fully digital Land Registry. When all conditions are met, a smart contract triggers payment and updates ownership records within minutes. Same-day or next-day completions become routine. Each step is recorded on a tamper-proof ledger and flagged for human oversight where needed, virtually eliminating fraud while retaining accountability and trust.

Greater inclusivity through new models

As the market creates new products, homeownership, or participation in home equity, becomes more attainable again. Traditional 25-year mortgages are just one option. Intergenerational 40–50 year terms, shared ownership, and fractional equity models are widely used and responsibly regulated. Platforms manage multiple stakeholders transparently, with safeguards that ensure these models act as genuine pathways to ownership rather than speculative traps.

Affordability also improves through greater stability in housing costs and technology-enabled reductions in living expenses, widening access compared with the 2020s.

Outcomes:

Completion times fall from months to days, failed transactions become rare, and consumers have clearer information and greater confidence throughout the journey.

Implications for mutuals

Building societies and credit unions could thrive in this future – but not by default. Much of the market will be commoditised, and it will be difficult to compete almost exclusively on rate. Success depends on proactive adaptation.

- **Ecosystem collaboration:** Mutuals collaborate through consortia to shape shared digital infrastructure and standards, ensuring influence and access rather than exclusion.
- **Digitally capable, human-centred:** Digital capability becomes the norm across the market. Mutuals differentiate by combining automation with trusted human support, positioning themselves as a “trusted copilot” alongside customers’ AI tools.

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- **Expanded, place-based role:** Mutuals move beyond savings and mortgages to become holistic, long term housing partners supporting green retrofits, financial wellbeing, and local housing initiatives. Investment in digital inclusion, including branch-based support for those uncomfortable with technology, reinforces their relevance to place and community.

In summary, Scenario 1 describes a UK home-buying journey that is dramatically improved: fast, transparent, and inclusive, while remaining grounded in trust and human judgement.

Scenario 2 Innovation Without Inclusion

Technology advances by 2050, but adoption is uneven. The UK never achieves a fully unified home-buying platform. Many local authorities, independent solicitors, and other stakeholders remain outside the digital system, meaning key steps still take weeks. The system improves for some, while many buyers see only modest gains.

Overview

A relatively small, affluent segment enjoys a near-seamless digital experience, much like Scenario 1. The majority including older, less tech-savvy, or lower-income buyers, still faces a fragmented, subpar process.

The UK never achieves a fully unified home-buying platform. By 2050, a typical transaction might take around three months, an improvement on today, but far from transformational.

Outcomes

Access to homeownership becomes more unequal. Those with resources use technology to secure faster, better deals, while many others see little improvement. Affordability challenges persist, and digital efficiencies disproportionately benefit investors and institutional landlords, accelerating a long-term rentership society.

Advanced mortgage algorithms introduce new forms of exclusion through opaque or biased decision-making. Trust erodes as consumers struggle to understand or challenge automated outcomes, and an advice gap remains for those unable to access personalised support.

Implications for mutuals

Building societies and credit unions are overshadowed by Big Tech firms and large banks that control the main property-finance platforms. Most mid sized mutuals are pushed into utility-like, back-end roles.

However, gaps remain. Uneven adoption creates demand for trusted, human-centred advice, allowing a smaller number of adaptive mutuals to serve excluded groups and local communities. This provides a lifeline for some households, but not enough to offset the sector's overall loss of scale and influence.



Strategic Implications

The divergence between these scenarios highlights critical choices for building societies and the wider system now:

- **Forge partnerships and lead in ecosystems:** Mutuels should collaborate with peers, fintechs, housing associations, and government to shape shared infrastructure and standards.
- **Diversify beyond traditional products:** Long-term relevance depends on expanding beyond savings and mortgages into broader financing options (such as shared ownership and intergenerational lending) and housing-related services.
- **Build hybrid distribution models:** Digital journeys must be complemented by accessible human support for complex decisions and vulnerable customers.
- **Champion trust, inclusion, and policy reform:** Mutuels should engage policymakers to shape outcomes-based regulation and ensure vulnerable customers are not left behind in the digital future, positioning the sector as a steward of fairness, trust, and long-term value.

Conclusion

Success for mutuals by 2050:

- Building societies remain significant and trusted providers in housing finance, with strong market presence and member loyalty.
- They deliver inclusive outcomes, expanding access to homeownership and bridging advice gaps through both digital innovation and personal guidance.
- Mutuals are recognised as integral to the housing ecosystem, leading on collaborative platforms, shaping industry standards, and delivering sustainable long-term value for members and communities.

Failure for mutuals by 2050:

- The mutual sector shrinks and loses relevance, with many societies demutualising or being absorbed as smaller back-office providers.
- Big Tech firms and large banks dominate customer relationships, leaving most mutuals confined to utility-like roles with little direct public engagement.
- Trust and influence erode. Lacking distinctive offerings, mutuals cease to shape policy or consumer outcomes and become largely irrelevant to the future housing market.

Implications for building societies, the sector, and policymakers:

- Individual mutuals must innovate and broaden their mission, investing in digital capability and new services beyond mortgages while preserving their trusted, human-centred ethos.
- Collectively, the mutual sector must coordinate and collaborate, developing shared infrastructure and standards to ensure a fair and efficient system.
- Policymakers and regulators should build on their June 2026 announcements to create an enabling environment mandating open standards, encouraging inclusive innovation, and emphasising consumer protection so that a modernised home-buying journey delivers better outcomes for all.