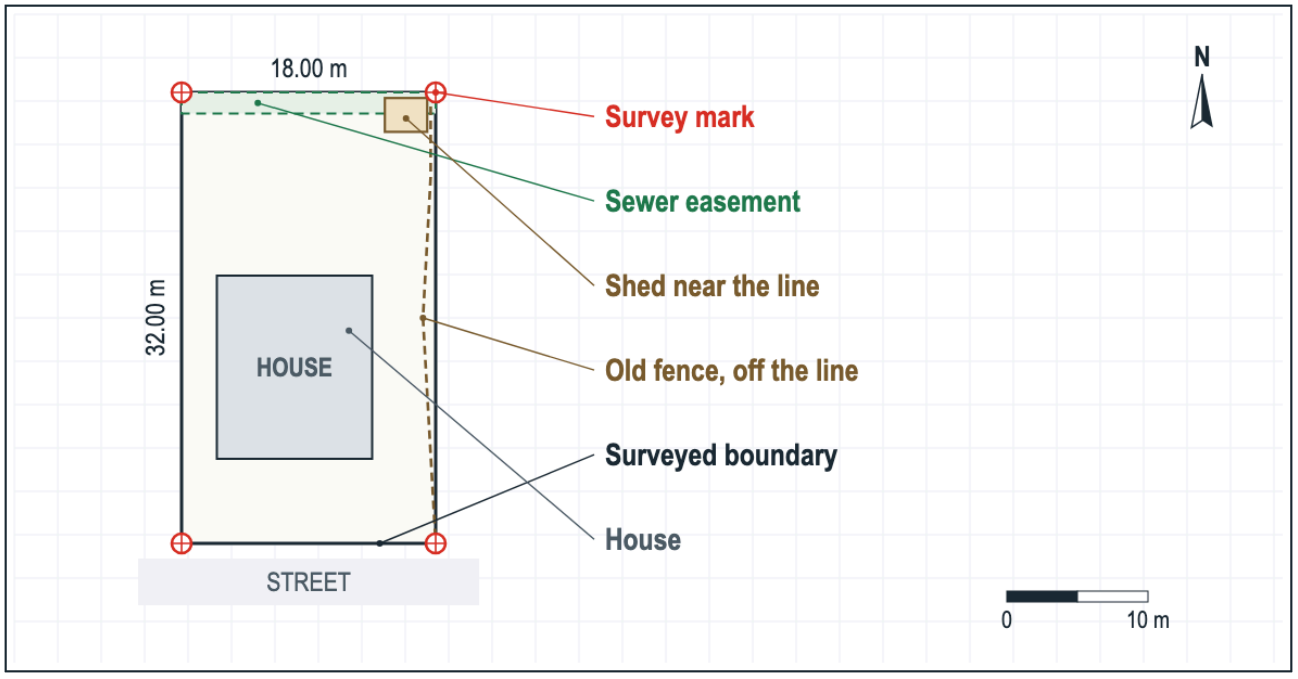
BOUNDARY SURVEY BEFORE BUYING IN CANBERRA: WHAT THE REPORTS MISS

By Surveyor Canberra · 2026-11-19



You have found a house in Canberra, the agent has handed over the contract, and it comes with a thick bundle: a building report, a pest report, the Crown lease, the title and a plan. It is easy to assume that bundle has checked everything about the property.

It has checked a lot. What it has not done is put the boundary on the ground. The building report looks at the house and the structures on the block. The deposited plan describes the block on paper. Neither tells you whether the side fence, the shed or the carport actually sits where the plan says the line is. That is the one question a boundary survey answers, and this guide shows when it is worth asking before you buy.

General information only, not legal advice. ACT legislation checked 19 November 2026.

Key takeaways

- An ACT sale contract must come with a building and compliance report, a pest report (for an occupied home), the Crown lease, a title extract and the deposited plan.
- The building report follows the pre-purchase standard for residential buildings. Its required contents are about the building and its approvals, not where the boundary sits.
- The deposited plan gives the block's legal dimensions. A boundary survey shows where those lines fall against the fences and buildings on site.
- There is no cooling-off period at auction, so ask about a survey before auction day or before you sign.

Do the reports in an ACT contract check the boundary?

Not as one of the things the law requires them to cover. The reports the seller must supply are about the house, the timber and the approvals. The ACT law that sets out what a building report must contain lists the inspection standard, the inspection date, approved plans and approvals for each structure, and the inspector's view on whether the structures comply. Locating the boundary is not on that list (Civil Law (Sale of Residential Property) Regulation 2004, s 7 (legislation.act.gov.au)).

The plan in the contract does define the block. But a plan is a drawing of bearings and distances. Whether the fence on the ground follows it is a separate question, and the required report contents do not include it.

What the seller has to give you in Canberra

Whenever offers can be made on a home in the ACT, the seller has to have a set of "required documents" available for buyers to inspect (Civil Law (Sale of Residential

Property) Act 2003, s 10 (legislation.act.gov.au)). For a house, the Act lists, among others (s 9 (legislation.act.gov.au)):

- a copy of the Crown lease;
- a current certified extract from the land titles register showing all interests affecting the property;
- a copy of the deposited plan;
- a copy of any encumbrance shown on the register, for example a restrictive covenant or an easement;
- the lease and building conveyancing inquiry documents from the planning authority (the building documents come from the home's building file);
- a building and compliance inspection report from an inspection not earlier than 3 months before the home was first advertised, offered or listed;
- a pest inspection report, if the home has been occupied.

There are exceptions. A class A unit does not need the building conveyancing inquiry documents, the building report or the pest report, and a home that has never been occupied or sold as a dwelling, or is still to be built, does not need the building conveyancing inquiry documents or the building report (s 9(2) (legislation.act.gov.au)).

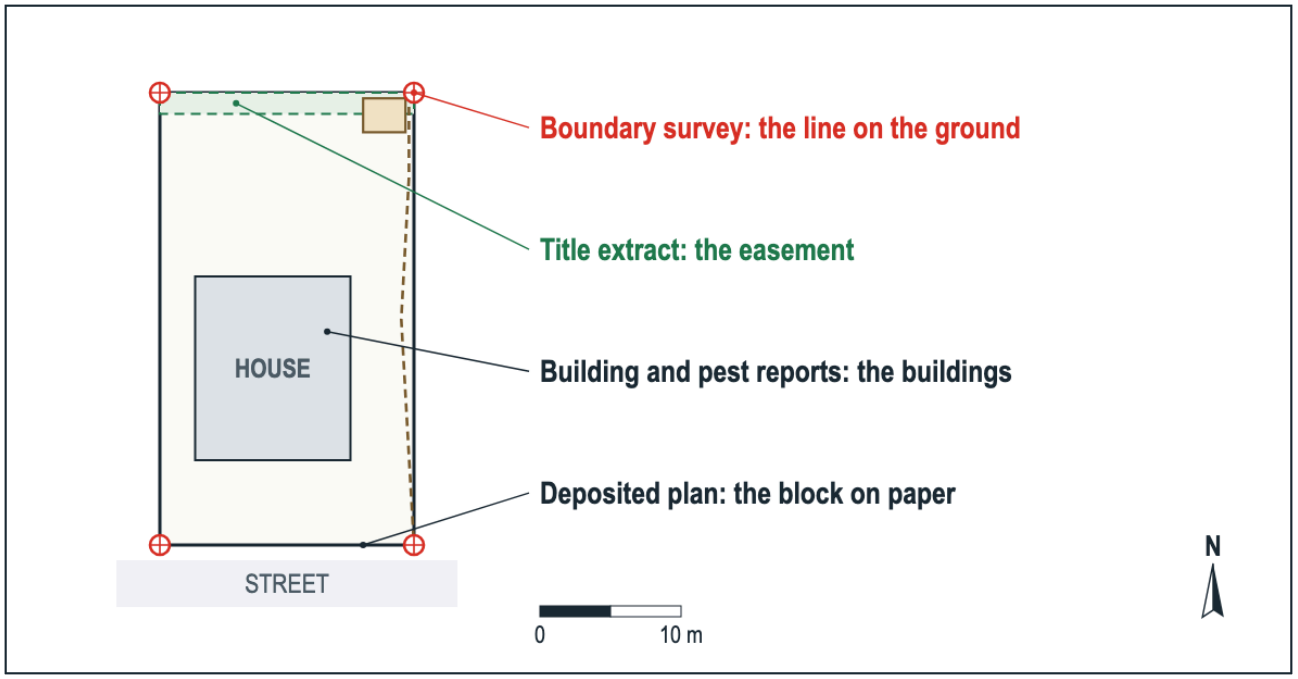
What the building and compliance report actually covers

The Regulation sets the rules for the building report (Civil Law (Sale of Residential Property) Regulation 2004, s 7 (legislation.act.gov.au)). It must:

- be completed in line with AS 4349.1, the Australian Standard for pre-purchase inspections of residential buildings;
- state the date of the inspection and the date it was written;
- include, for each structure on the property, any approved plans, building approval, building permit and certificate of occupancy;
- give the inspector's view on whether each structure substantially complies with its approved plans, and whether it needed a building approval or a development approval.

It also says no reliance may be placed on the report for a contract made more than 180 days after the inspection. If a home has been on the market for a while, check that date.

That is a solid check of the house and its paperwork. It tells you whether the extension was approved and whether the deck matches its plans. Nothing in that list asks the inspector to find the survey marks or measure the fence against the plan.



Where the boundary question falls between the checks

Document	What it tells you	What it leaves open
Building and compliance report	Condition of the house and structures, their approvals and plans	The boundary line
Pest inspection report	Timber pest activity and damage	The boundary line
Deposited plan	The block's legal dimensions and shape	Fences against it

Document	What it tells you	What it leaves open
Title extract and encumbrances	Registered interests, such as easements and covenants	Easement on site
Building file documents	Any survey plan held for the home, with approvals	Work done since
Boundary survey	Where the legal boundary sits on the ground, against fences and buildings	Legal questions

The building file is worth a close look. The building conveyancing inquiry documents can include "any survey plan for the residence signed by a registered surveyor" held by the planning authority (Regulation, s 8 (legislation.act.gov.au)). If one is there, it shows the house against the boundary at the time it was drawn. It will not show a fence, shed or carport added since.

Buying in Canberra and unsure about a fence or shed?

Send us the address and your exchange or auction date. We will tell you, free, whether a survey is worth it and what it would involve.

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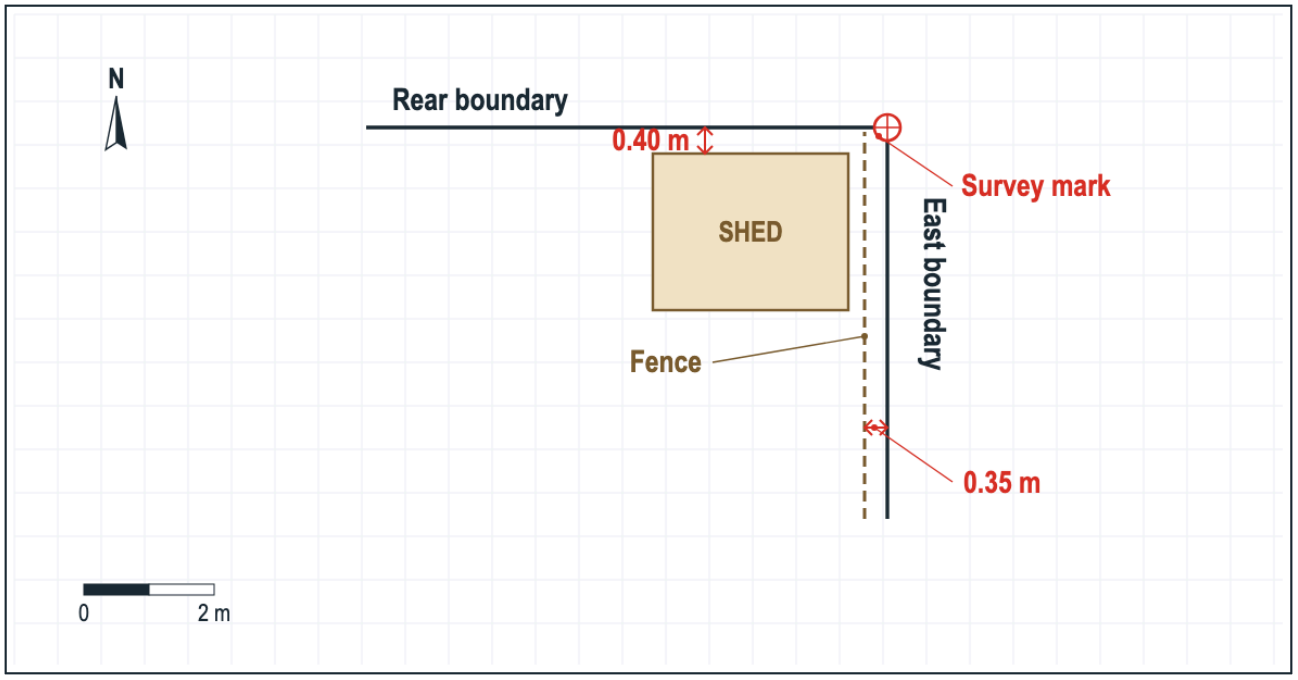
What a boundary survey shows a buyer

A boundary survey shows where the existing legal boundaries of the block sit on the ground and how nearby fences or buildings relate to them. The surveyor gathers the registered plans and survey records for the block, finds and measures the survey marks on site, and checks the boundary against those records. Where the records and the measurements do not agree, the differences are noted on the plan or in a report with it.

For a buyer, that turns a feeling about the side fence into measurements you can take to your lawyer:

- where each fence runs against the line, and by how much it is off;
- how close a shed, garage or carport is to the boundary;
- whether anything on the block crosses into the neighbour's land, or theirs into yours;
- where a registered easement falls against the buildings on site.

A survey does not settle a disagreement with a neighbour or replace any approval the work needs. It gives you the facts to decide, before you are committed.



Signs at the inspection that make a survey worth asking about

A survey is not needed for every purchase. These are the signs that make it worth a phone call before you sign:

1. **A fence that wanders.** It bows, steps or runs at a slight angle to the house, or it looks much newer on one stretch than another.
2. **A structure close to the line.** A shed, garage, carport, pergola or retaining wall built right up to a side or rear fence.

3. **Recent work near a boundary.** An extension, granny flat or new driveway, especially if the building file has no recent survey plan.
4. **An easement in the paperwork.** The title extract shows a sewer or stormwater easement, and something has been built near it.
5. **Changes you want to make.** You want to extend, add a second dwelling or replace a fence soon after settlement.

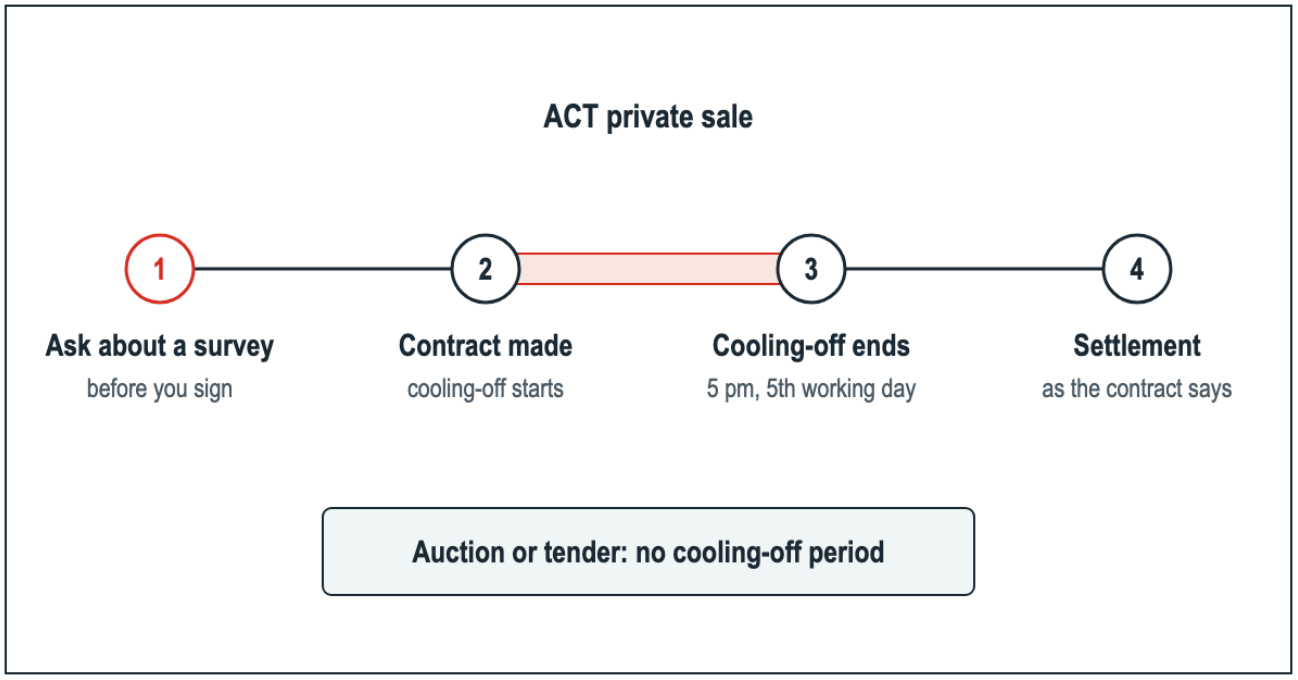
If none of those apply, the documents in the contract may be all you need. If one does, it is easier to act on what a survey shows before you are committed than after settlement. Our guide to land survey costs in Canberra sets out the published prices and what moves them.

When to ask: exchange, auctions and cooling-off

The cooling-off rules are set out in the Act (Civil Law (Sale of Residential Property) Act 2003, s 12 to 15 (legislation.act.gov.au)):

- A cooling-off period starts when the contract is made and ends at 5 pm on the 5th working day after that.
- There is no cooling-off period if the home is sold at auction or by tender, if the buyer is a corporation, or if the buyer waives it with a lawyer's certificate.
- A bidder who buys on auction day after the property is passed in also has no cooling-off period.
- The cooling-off period can be extended by a term in the contract or by a written agreement between buyer and seller made before it ends; shortening it needs a lawyer's certificate.
- A buyer who rescinds during cooling-off forfeits 0.25% of the purchase price to the seller.

Most residential boundary surveys are completed within 3 to 5 business days from booking, but that depends on the block and the records, and we cannot promise a survey inside a cooling-off period. The safer order is to ask before you sign, or before auction day, and to give us the date you are working to. Your lawyer can tell you whether a longer cooling-off period or a contract condition suits your purchase.



If you have not looked at the block yet, our guide to what ACTmapi shows about property boundaries explains how to find it and what the map line can and cannot tell you.

Boundary questions Canberra buyers ask

Does the building and pest report check the boundary?

Not as a required item. The ACT rules for the building report cover the condition of the building, its approvals and whether structures comply with their plans. Locating the boundary is not part of the required contents (Regulation, s 7 (legislation.act.gov.au)). The pest report deals with timber pests. If you want to know what a particular report covered, ask the inspector.

Is the deposited plan in the contract enough?

It is the legal description of the block, so it is the right starting point. It does not show where the fences and buildings on site sit against the line. If a fence or structure looks close, a boundary survey measures it.

Can I get a survey during the cooling-off period?

Sometimes, but do not count on it. The ACT cooling-off period ends at 5 pm on the 5th working day after the contract is made, and there is none at auction or by tender (Act, s 12 (legislation.act.gov.au)). Ask before you sign and tell us your dates.

Who pays for a survey before buying?

The buyer who orders it. The seller must supply the required documents, but a boundary survey is not one of them (Act, s 9 (legislation.act.gov.au)).

What if the survey shows the fence is off the line?

You get the measurements before you are committed, and you can take them to your lawyer. The survey records the facts; what to do about them is a legal and commercial decision for you.

Know where the line is before you buy

Free advice and an estimate for boundary surveys across Canberra and the ACT. Tell us the address and your dates.

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