



**Too often people hear horror stories about bad experiences with building companies so we have put together a guide to help you conduct your project and your dealings with your chosen contractor for the best possible outcome.**

### Write a detailed specification

You need to specify the work to be done and the materials to be used so that there is no misunderstanding further into the process.

- If you want particular branded items, make sure that your contractor knows this.
- Be clear from the start what needs to be done and the standard of finish. Changes once the work has started can prove expensive.
- Make sure your specification contains sufficient detail. For example, if you specify "remove old kitchen and fit new" that is exactly what the builder will do. If you expect the builder to remove the old units from your property and dispose of them, you need to spell this out otherwise they will end up in your front garden or you will have an additional cost.
- Send the specification to the builders before they come to view your property so that they have had time to think about any questions. If they don't have any questions about the specification, they may well not have read it.

### Finding a building contractor

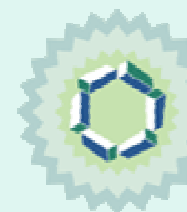
Make a list of building contractors in your area. Ask friends, relatives or neighbours for recommendations. Check out the company websites to see if there are details of previous projects or testimonials.

Make a shortlist of three companies for further investigation.

Make some more detailed enquires of the three companies. For example you could...

- Make sure that they have proper insurance and ask to see the certificates. Check that the certificates have not expired.
- Ask for references for previous work. If you can speak to previous clients, ask them whether the work was completed on time and within budget.
- Check what industry accreditations the contractor has and that they are current. Whilst builders do not have to be accredited it is certainly better to choose one that is because they will have invested time and money in the process and will need to operate safely and with secure financial backing in place to get and maintain accreditation.
- Ask for the company VAT number. It's almost impossible for a building company to operate without reaching the VAT threshold so if the company is not registered that should ring alarm bells.

Before you agree to let a building contractor perform work, you should thoroughly check out the company and get guarantees in writing.



constructionline



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### Getting a price

A builder will usually give you an estimate, which you hope will be close to the actual final cost. We will provide you with a firm quote.

Be prepared for the final cost to change and ensure that your builder discusses and agrees any changes and their associated cost with you prior to doing the work. Make sure that you have all changes to the original specification in writing.

It is standard practice to obtain three estimates. Whilst this seems like a good idea, take into account that builders will have different ways of estimating and whilst the middle estimate may seem like the safest option, take the following into account:

- Inexperienced builders may make mistakes in pricing
- Busy builders may quote high thus skewing the results
- Builders without much work may quote low hoping that variations will give them an opportunity to make additional profit. They might also be using low quality materials.

Make sure you get an accurate estimate based upon your detailed specification and that all three estimates use the same basis to produce the price.

### Subcontractors

You should also ask how much, if any, of the work will be performed by subcontractors. Subcontractors are not taboo by any means, but some companies lack the ability to efficiently coordinate and manage them.

Subcontractors usually have their own insurance. Make sure your builder confirms that he regularly checks his subcontractors insurance.

### The contract

Once you've chosen your building contractor you should agree on a start date and reasonable project duration. You should be offered a standard building contract in plain English, such as the ones approved by the Federation of Master Builders. These contracts set everything out in writing and protect both parties.

If the contract wording seems unclear and you have any doubts seek independent third party advice. We will offer you a standard universally accepted contract wording, amended to your specific project.

### Variations

All jobs will have variations that occur during works on-site due to unforeseen events. Your original well-written specifications will help to close the gap between the estimated price and the price that you actually pay.

The contract should set out how you and your builder will deal with variations. Make sure that you stick to this process.

It's worth mentioning at this point the essential ingredient of any building project -- the contingency fund. Always ensure it stands at no less than 10% of the expected expenditure.

### Payments

Do not pay for the full job in advance. Most contractors will require a small deposit upon signing, half upon actually beginning the job and the remainder on completion.

On larger jobs, such as a room addition, the payment will be broken into a greater number of what is called stage payments. Again, make sure that your contract sets out when you need to pay these amounts

and on what basis for example after a period of time has elapsed or at various 'benchmark' stages of the work having been completed.

If the contractor demands anything higher than 50%, be cautious. If they give the reason that that should cover all their materials and initial costs that may mean that the company is in bad financial standing. You might want to reconsider dealing with such a company.

Contractors offering cash / vat free deals are not easily tracked down if things go wrong.

### What do I do if things go wrong?

Try to resolve any problems verbally with your builder but if you do not get a satisfactory response and quick action, put your complaint in writing. In any case, make sure you keep notes of conversations in case you need to quote them in the future.

- Give your builder a chance to put things right but make sure you set a deadline.
- Take photos of any work you are unhappy with recording the time and date taken.
- Consider withholding payments but check the contract you have with the contractor.
- Get advice - speak to the Trading Standards Department, Citizens Advice Bureau, consult a solicitor, engage a Chartered Building Surveyor or other suitably qualified professional person.
- If the contractor is a member of a trade association, speak to them they may offer an arbitration scheme.
- Speak to your Building Control Surveyor, who may be able to assist on health and safety issues.