

Find the right builder

1. References from Previous Clients

Personal recommendation and local reputation count for a lot. Ideally we are looking for a builder who leaves all their clients delighted! If so, they will be doing an excellent job, because this is not easy. So you want to know whether the builder has previous clients who are willing to speak to you honestly about their experience of working together. In particular you want to know how proactively any unforeseen problems were addressed and dealt with. For example, if a project gets behind programme, how good are they about making up the time?

2. Relevant Experience in the Sector

It is not essential that the builder has done projects before in the church sector, and sometimes a keen tender price can be achieved from a builder who has all the right skills and is eager to get into church work. What is important, however, is that the builder can demonstrate a command of the relevant issues. For example, alterations to a listed church should not be entrusted to a builder who only has experience of new build, and a builder who builds the occasional house will not be right for a substantial new building.

3. Size Matters

Aside from some builders being more suited to, say, new build as against conservation work, most builders will do the majority of their work within a range of contract size. Below that size and they are unlikely to be as cost-effective as a smaller firm carrying less overhead; above that size and they may struggle with managing the logistics of a larger project. It is good therefore to ask about the contract value of their three largest projects to date, and how often they do projects of this size. And beside that, one needs to look at the complexity of a project – a smaller project on a tighter site may well be more demanding than a larger project on an open site. It's a question of horses for courses.

4. Financial Checks

The cost to the client of their Contractor going bust during a building project can be very significant, so before appointing a Contractor it is well worth running some financial checks. If the firm is a limited company then accounts should be available from Companies House, though this will be old information. You can also glean useful information on the directors and the company structure – for example a director with a history of starting and closing down companies may be a warning sign. It is also wise to ask for a Banker's Reference, which should show you the extent of the firm's liquidity – you want to see that they have adequate room for financial manoeuvre.

5. Visit Completed Projects

There is no substitute for seeing the quality of a completed project by the same builder. Even if it is the same building firm, ask whether the same team of people that did that project would be

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involved in yours. Was the project delivered to time and to budget, or if not what were the good reasons?

6. Organisational Ability

Regrettably, organisational skills are often not a strong point, particularly for smaller builders, yet from a client's point of view this can have a big impact on your experience of the building process. In particular you want to know there is someone in charge who lives and breathes detail, who cares enough about doing a good job to think ahead and spot problems before they arise, rather than merely responding when faced with them. An ability to produce an intelligent project programme (in the form of a GANTT chart, with a critical path) is an important indicator.

7. Direct Labour

Ask about the balance between directly employed staff ('on the books') and subcontractors. Knowing which trades a builder has in house can be revealing – do they for example have their own plasterers, or stone masons. There is no one right answer to this; many builders produce great buildings using a lot of subcontracted labour, but that will depend on the quality of the relationships between the parties, and will have a big impact on the finished product.

8. Health and Safety Record

Has the Contractor ever had any serious accidents on site? Can they show you a robust Health and Safety Plan for a similar project? Don't judge this on the number of pages – it is easy to waste trees producing reams of standard information that no-one ever reads. What you are looking for is targeted project-specific information that analyses risky procedures and that documents an appropriate method statement for managing that risk.

9. Visit Their Offices, Look Inside Their Vans

Most people would regard these things as irrelevant, but these "Critical Non-Essentials" can speak volumes about the attitude of staff and how well-managed they are. And both of those are very relevant factors, because once again they will impact on the quality of the finished product.

10. Who Would We Be Dealing With?

At the enquiries stage, you would not expect to know who would be running a project on site, and most contact with the builder should in any case be through your architect. Even so, it is still really helpful to know how a builder structures their work, who is responsible for what, and how easy it will be to get in touch with the relevant person in authority if the need arose.



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Some of the above items are technical in nature, and you may well need professional help in interpreting the responses to these queries. Others are more a question of personal chemistry, of 'fit'. What you are looking for is a builder in whom you can have confidence to deliver a good result. And that firm will have someone in charge with whom both client and architect feel they have a good rapport, and to whom they can go for a mature discussion, should the need arise. A building contract is like a form of marriage; for many months you will be in partnership together, so it is worth doing some homework in advance.