

First Things First

This section concentrates on all of the activities required before anyone starts on site. Most of the information should be fairly straightforward and non-technical, but there are some factors which will really put a spanner in the works if they are not considered early in the project.

Design. Most readers have a good idea of what works and what doesn't work in a family home. Some people have pet hates, and others will never let go of their 'must-haves', whether for functional or aesthetic reasons. It may seem strange to consider design before discussing the plot of land, but it's important that once you find your plot, the design and planning stages are completed as soon as possible, so it pays to consider these things early. It will probably be wise not to go to great lengths before you know your site, but thinking about your general layout will be very useful. If you are lucky enough to have a plot already, all of your efforts can be channelled into a site-specific design. If not, you will need to bear in mind that your cunning plan will probably need to be tweaked to fit into the landscape, make optimum use of daylight, and to allow easy access.

Unless you are blessed with an artistic and technical flair, it is a good idea to approach an architectural technician or architect. Traditionally, the architect came up with the fancy ideas, and his technician sweated blood trying to design a building to match his master's vision. Nowadays, many architectural technicians have plenty of design experience which couples with their technical ability to allow them to plan a very workable design. The technicians do not spend as long studying (and can't call themselves 'Architects') so tend not to charge so much for their time.



Architects, on the other hand, *may* be able to provide more flair with their ideas, but will not necessarily have the same technical abilities. There are extremes with both; we have met architects who have never been on a building site since university, and we know technicians who do not have a creative bone in their bodies. Recommendation from friends and relations, or painstaking research into past work, are the only solutions.

We will cover Planning Permission and Building Regulations later on, but in considering your design, you must bear in mind the restrictions which will be imposed by the Local Authority Planning Department, and the regulations which will be checked by the Building Control Department. It is a bit of a waste of time dreaming up the most idyllic design for your home if no-one is going to let you build it! Furthermore, if your home needs to be assessed under the Code for Sustainable homes, it can be very expensive and time consuming if you have to re-design to meet the Code.

The Plot. Finding land in the UK can be a challenge. If you buy land with planning permission, you will be reducing your risk but paying for the privilege. The granting of Planning Permission can increase the value of land by a factor of 10, so knowledge of the Local Plan may mean that speculatively buying a piece of agricultural land could be a fantastic investment, but everyone knows this and it's a competitive market. If Full Permission has been granted, the design and footprint will have been finalised. There is no guarantee that you can change the design, so check before you buy. You have slightly more manoeuvrability if buying land with Outline Planning Permission, but you should check any restrictions which have been imposed.



Another route to a plot is to build a 'replacement dwelling'; this entails exactly what it says. Buy a house. Get permission to knock it down and start again. However, there are strict rules about the permitted footprint increase; you can't necessarily buy a shed and build a mansion in its place.

Numerous websites claim to be able to help in finding a plot, but in these troubled financial times, it is worth approaching a developer with an un-finished plot; they may be willing to sell a corner of a site relatively cheaply just to help their cashflow.

Planning Permission, Energy Assessments and Building Regulations. These bodies are not supposed to be a hindrance, but you may disagree after dealing with them. The Planning Department should implement the Local Development Plan, so it would be a good idea to find out what this says, and most authorities have theirs on-line. Building Control are responsible for checking that all construction work follows national rules for safety and access. Their rule books cover a vast array of topics with frighteningly specific detail, but it is the job of the architect or technician to ensure that the building is designed to meet all necessary regulations. Specific attention will be paid to: disabled access and accessibility; fire escapes and fire safety; and thermal and sound insulation, amongst others.

Planning Application. Your architect or technician will draw up plans and a 'Design and Access Statement' as a bare minimum. These documents tell the Planners exactly what the building is going to look like, and precisely where it (and your driveway etc) will be positioned. This is important because they need to consider what your building will look like in the existing surroundings; there are rules on how much space you must have between you and your neighbour, as well as 'overlooking' rules. The statement explains the rationale behind the application and explains how your home will meet the many regulations which will undoubtedly be applicable for your site.

Needless to say, you may not commence work before Planning Permission has been granted, and the approval letter will probably include conditions which are to be met before you start (like submitting samples of bricks, tiles etc for approval).

Environmental Assessment. More and more Local Authorities are insisting on an assessment under the Code for Sustainable Homes, and in fact this will come into law throughout England and Wales over the next few years. It is vital that the assessor is brought on-board at an early stage so that your plans run hand-in-hand with the latest thinking on sustainability. Failure to plan with the CSH in mind may result in a large scale re-think if you need to do an assessment in retrospect.

Building Regulations Application. Strangely, you do not need Building regulations approval before commencing work, but if you opt for this approach (Building Notice), you have no guarantee that your work will be approved. An accurate and comprehensive Building Regulations application with full approval means that the Local Authority has agreed to your building in accordance with your plans; all you have to do is stick to them.

An alternative to using the Local Authority is to use an LABC approved inspector (of which there are many about the country). These companies are licensed to act on behalf of the Local Authority, and are often quicker to react despite heeding the same regulations.

There are formal inspections throughout the building process, and failure to inform the authority in good time will cause delays, or may lead to uncovering work if you have carried on regardless (especially drains and plasterboard). These inspections are usually;

Inspection	Notice Required
Commencement	48 hrs
Excavation of foundations	24 hrs
Concrete poured into foundations	24 hrs
Concrete poured 'oversite' (the slab)	24 hrs
DPC Laid	24 hrs
Immediately prior to plaster-boarding	As required
Drains laid, ready to test	24 hrs
Drains backfilled, ready for test	<7 days after completion
Building ready to be occupied	7 days
Final completion	<7 days after completion
Connection to public sewer	24 hrs

Programme. Slippage in the programme is the most immediately noticeable element in the Project Management Triple (Time – Cost – Quality), and is probably the most difficult to prevent. No matter how hard you try, if the plasterer's dog needs to be taken to the vet, no amount of pleading is going to get him to plaster your house just because he said he would last week. And the good Lord has yet to put a stop on the rain just because the digger is booked.

As ever, time is related to money, and you should consider both hand-in-hand. If you have a deadline such as a temporary rental-accommodation arrangement due to end after 6 months, you should mitigate the risk of programme slippage in two ways. Firstly, aim to finish early, and strive for this new deadline. Delays will not have such an impact on finances if you eat slightly into this buffer zone. Secondly, put an emergency plan in place, such as an on-site caravan or local B+B for the final few days if the worst comes to the worst.

If your accommodation is not an issue, there will be other considerations which are affected by delays: scaffolding; welfare facilities; compounded delays by moving seasons and poorer conditions, all these and more will affect time and consequently money, and something has to suffer (Quality? Bank balance? Scope?)

If you have access to a Project Management software tool, you can spend a productive and enlightening few evenings constructing a Gantt chart for your programme. (Simply, a Gantt Chart is a list of tasks, and once you have stated their durations and inter-relationships, the software will devise the schedule.) In the absence of such a tool, a big piece of graph paper, a pencil and an eraser (!) will allow you to draw a block diagram to give an idea of what needs to be done and when. If you do your research carefully, you can include lead-times for the men, materials and plant required for each task, enabling you to can produce a calendar showing every day's requirements.

Users of the software will be able to select 'Critical Path Analysis'. The 'paper and pencil' planner should aim to gain a similar understanding of the project. The Critical Path is the set of linked events which together lead from the first task to the very last. Why is this important? If any of the tasks on the Critical Path is delayed, it is almost guaranteed that the end date will also be delayed. This analysis is never wasted time. In any project there are obviously many tasks which can be allowed to slip slightly without any impact on the critical path. This is important because the successful Project Manager needs to concentrate effort where it will have most impact: unless you plan to spend all of your time on the build, you will undoubtedly have other things to occupy you, so you might as well spend your time most effectively. Why waste time fretting over (relative) trivia if a critical activity is in jeopardy?

When constructing your programme, you should if at all possible consult someone with construction experience. Without this reality check you will be amazed at how wrong your time estimates can be. Even with some professional guidance, some activities will inevitably not happen in the timescales you predict; some will be shorter, and most will be longer.

There are a few tasks with surprisingly long lead times. Most utility companies take an age to do their work, even though they insist on up-front payment. Some materials are available 'ex-yard' and can be delivered within 24 hours. Others can take months, so research into lead times is time well spent.

Engaging the Contractor. It is never a bad idea to start talking to Contractors sooner rather than later; you may be surprised at what you can glean from them during the process of discussing your project. You will need to determine whether you want a main contractor or whether you will employ tradesmen directly, acting effectively as the main contractor yourself. There are advantages to each. An independent main contractor will have experience of building and will undoubtedly have access to all of the trades that will be needed. However, this will involve him taking part of the management duties, and he will charge a premium for this work. He will be able to give the 'reality check' to your programme, but will temper his plans in the knowledge that he has other projects simmering away at the same time; will yours be his priority? Without a main contractor, and armed only with the Yellow Pages and perhaps some word-of-mouth recommendations, you will have an awful lot more to do. However, you will have control of the project and will not have other distractions, so there is potential for a tighter grip on the programme.



Surprisingly, contracts make some contractors shudder with horror. If this happens when you broach the subject, you should ask yourself why your potential 'main man' does not want to be held to a written agreement. Plenty of contractors are fully familiar with contracts, so you would be well advised to use one of these, and a good contractor will have a suitable draft contract easily available; you should not need to start writing one from scratch.

You should always obtain written confirmation of any agreements you make. Your mobile phone will be glued to your ear following each visit to site as you chase-up the next delivery or tradesman, but unless you have a record of your conversations, little pressure can be brought to bear on errant third parties. Heaven forbid that any legal action needs to be taken, but a clear 'audit trail' will ease your way. If email is not an option, and writing a letter is not appropriate, simply keep a diary of events. You should keep a Site Diary anyway, so this will be a very modest increase in your workload.

Quotations for work are the simplest way to keep track of forecast expenditure. However, beware of 'Scope creep' and incomplete schedules of work. There are plenty of suppliers and tradesmen who will give you a fantastic quotation, but carefully examining the small print may reveal that there are numerous items left off; these will need to be completed by someone, and both time and cost will suffer if they are not wrapped up early. A good example of this is the supply and installation of the roof structure; if the contractor omits the fascia, barge board and soffit from his quotation, you will find that you have another week's work and a large outlay before the roof tilers can get to work. You would not be the first customer to have a slight change of mind once the structure goes up and you can see the actual space and light available. If you have not agreed rates for 'extras', you risk being stung with a large bill for what may seem relatively minor modifications. The message is simple. Try to provide as many details as possible when you send out requests for quotations; this will reduce the number of 'provisional costings' (known as PC Sums) in the quotations. Secondly, scrutinise each quotation you receive to ensure that you are getting like-for-like; the cheapest may be the cheapest for a very good reason.