



Carpenter Oak & Woodland  
Traditional & Contemporary Timber Frames

# How to choose a builder for your oak framed house





## Procurement routes

There are several ways in which you can buy your new self build home. To some extent you can blend the methods to suit your needs but there are some clearly recognised options that have been tried and tested in the construction industry for years. In broad terms the options are.

**Competitive tender** – where you send out a tender pack (i.e. a specification for your building) to a number of builders that you've selected and ask them to quote for the job – for more detail see page 2

**Negotiated contract** – where you appoint a builder as part of your team at an early stage and negotiate a price for the job – for more detail see page 4

**Design and build** – where you appoint a builder on day one to design and build your house to a specified budget – for more detail see page 5

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## Competitive tender

At the end of the design process and when your building is fully specified a tender pack setting out the specification of your building is sent out to several builders that you have previously vetted.

Each company will evaluate the tender pack, interpret the scope of work and submit a price for the project. You then evaluate the quotations you've received and select the builder you feel is most appropriate.

*You or your architect will need to:*

**Vet the builders** to satisfy yourself that they are capable of doing the job. You should consider their size, quality of work, the type of projects they've previously undertaken, the scope of service they offer and crucially, if you can work with them.

**Produce a specification** for your building. The tighter the specification the more accurate the quotations will be and the less variation you will get between them.

**Evaluate the quotations** which are rarely in a standardised format unless you have produced a bill of quantities.

*What are the pitfalls?*

**Best price doesn't always mean best value** and this is particularly true if you have left 'wriggle' room in your specification. To give a simple example, if you ask me to build your house of bricks I can quote for the cheapest bricks I can lay my hands on. They won't look very nice but once you've contracted me to build it that's not my problem. However if you specify that the bricks must be a 'Lindum handmade brick from York Handmade bricks or equivalent' then clearly this is what I need to price for and importantly what I must use if you appoint me.

**Vetting builders will take time** because you want to build an oak framed house you should really find a builder who has experience with the way the oak performs in the long term. You will need someone with a real eye for detail so that the parts of the building that interface with the oak frame do so in such a way that ensures a long term high quality finish.

**Preparing a tender pack is complex** and would normally be carried out by a professional architect or



quantity surveyor. If you are trying to cut cost and do it yourself there is every chance that you will pay for it later because your specification was incomplete or ambiguous. Either genuine misunderstanding or wriggle room leads to the dreaded 'variations' or 'extras' on site.

**Evaluating quotations can be incredibly difficult,** even experienced professionals often find it tricky to ensure that they are comparing apples with apples. The way in which different builders will package up the elements of their price will be different. Separating out prices so that a proper comparison can be made will often mean putting an array of questions to each company to help you understand how they have priced the work.

**There will always be wriggle room** and the focus on price rather than value tends to introduce a rather adversarial element to the relationship between the architect, client and builder.

**It adds another couple of months to the programme** because of the time needed for builders to evaluate the specification and submit their quotation.

*What are the benefits?*

We think the benefits are more perceived than actual. The perception is that introducing competition guarantees best price. In our experience the reality is that it guarantees that you get some low quotes but the scope for variations almost always leads to an increase in the final 'as built' cost. The quandary is that you will often get a slightly less scrupulous builder, perhaps getting desperate for a job to run onto after his current project, who will look for ambiguities in the specification where he can price low and bank on extra costs to increase his margin once he's contracted.





## Negotiated contract

With a negotiated contract you involve a builder much earlier in the process than with competitive tendering, normally shortly after planning has been approved and prior to the architect embarking on production drawings. Through the early involvement of the builder you get professional input on the 'buildability' of your home. As the architect develops the working drawings he elicits input from the builder so that the most efficient methods and materials can be identified and the working drawings adapted to accommodate these.

Once the working drawings are complete the builder is asked to provide a quotation for the work. This will often be compared against a benchmark established by a quantity surveyor. It is then normal for some discussion and negotiation to take place to ensure that the client is happy with what he is paying and the builder is happy that the project is commercially viable for him.

Everyone has an interest and responsibility for accurate pricing because they have contributed to the design and specification from very early on.

### *You or your architect will need to do:*

**Vet the builders** and find the right one sooner rather than later because in this form of contract they will be part of the project for much longer and play a key role in how the house will be put together.

**Negotiate with the builder** once he has been able to price the project. However he will have been part of the team for some time and should have a very good understanding of the building so there is much less room for ambiguity and in a good working relationship

with someone you trust genuine misunderstandings can be ironed out in everyone's interest.

### *What are the pitfalls?*

Frankly it's difficult to see any that warrant particular attention. Some people believe that removing the element of competition means that you can't ensure you are getting value for money. In our experience the relatively modest cost of employing a quantity surveyor to benchmark the cost is far more reliable than competitive tendering where too many external influences (such as how busy those quoting are or how much ambiguity there is in the specification) affect the quotes that are submitted.

### *What are the benefits?*

**Input from a construction professional** from very early on so that build efficiency can be properly evaluated as the design develops.

**A shorter build programme** because the tender process is eliminated. In addition the builder has much more prior notice of the anticipated start date on site and can manage other projects to ensure an immediate start on site once you are ready to go.

**A more harmonious relationship** with a focus on value rather than price. The builder understands that you don't want to pay any more than you have to and you understand that it has to be commercially viable for him. Dialogue about changes to the specification as the building progresses are far more likely to lead to mutual agreements with less compromise more quickly.

## Design and build

In a design and build contract you appoint the builder on day one so that he will both design your house and construct it. He will take a brief from you so that he understands what you want to build and how much you have to spend. It then becomes his responsibility to complete the project to the specification you agree with him.

Design and build contracts are less common with one off bespoke houses than they are with mass developments but there are some very good contractors who will happily work this way. They will either have their own in house architectural expertise or they'll work with a third party practice with which they have a good working relationship.

### What you will need to do:

**Find a main contractor of the right quality** and in the right locale with the resources to operate this form of contract. Oak framing has some characteristics that not all builders are familiar with so you would benefit from finding someone with experience in building with it.

With this form of contract, once you have appointed your builder there is very little else for you to do except to make decisions on the design and fitting out of your home.

### What are the pitfalls?

**You may not get the creativity** that you get from appointing an architect independently. This will depend on the main contractor you appoint. Larger building firms capable of taking on a design and build contract may employ architectural technicians rather than architects. Whilst this isn't in itself a problem you need to find out if they've got the flair to interpret your ideas. In most architectural practices the architects will be responsible for helping you explore your own ideas whilst bringing their creative flair to bear on the design. Once the scheme is underway a lot of the very detailed work and production drawings are done by technicians who have an in depth understanding of building techniques and the products on the market. These are two different and complimentary skill sets. Having said this some main contractors will employ a third party architect to undertake the design on their behalf.

**Ensuring you get value for money** may mean employing an independent quantity surveyor and given that your architect would normally review the contract with the main contractor you may need an experienced solicitor to review the contract before you enter into it.

### What are the benefits?

**You have one company responsible** for both the design and the delivery of the project so different parties can't blame each other for discrepancies in the design or overruns on the programme or budget.

