

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING A PLUMBING & HEATING CONTRACTOR



This advice guide is part of a series of free guides produced by the Association of Plumbing & Heating Contractors Ltd. which provide consumers with essential information on a range of plumbing and heating matters including installations, repairs and maintenance.

When looking for a contractor to undertake work on plumbing, heating or microgeneration (technologies used to produce electricity and heat from renewable sources) systems it is advisable to follow the three step approach outlined below.

Step 1 – Identifying the contractor

This is an important step, you need to think about the company you are employing and if they are the right company to undertake the work that you require carrying out. The range of works carried out by plumbing and heating companies does vary – some companies multi-task across a

full range of activities whereas some companies tend to specialise in say service and maintenance work, so you will need to take this point into account in your initial selection. The following outlines the main points to sourcing reliable plumbing and heating contractors.

- **Are they members of a trade association?** - Always check their credentials. Trade associations will always validate a tradesman's claim to membership, so a two minute phone call could be invaluable. Trade associations usually have minimum requirements to join, ask them when you call to find out what these requirements are. Most trade associations will be able to provide you with a breakdown of the range of works carried out by their members in your local area.
- **Have they worked for anybody you know?** - 'Word of mouth' recommendations can be useful in determining a reliable contractor. Ask friends, family and neighbours and don't be afraid to ask to look at the work done by the contractor to see what it looks like and to also gain an understanding of how well they carried out the work.
- **Is your chosen company qualified and capable of carrying out the work?** - Make sure you check the company's qualifications and experience of carrying out similar work. If they are not already members of a trade association, ask to see references from other customers. Check online for any customer feedback. Don't be scared to ask about their qualifications and experience.

- **Are they a good business?** - You should pick a contractor that has:
 - A physical address - you may need to make contact both during and after the work, beware of companies that don't readily provide this information.
 - A contact telephone number – again you may need to make contact by telephone, particularly if an emergency situation arises such as a leak, so a contact number is vital.
 - An established time in business - ask how long they have been in business as this can be a useful indication, a contractor with a reputation to persevere is more likely to be around if you have problems later.
 - One final pointer in this step is to always remember that work on gas systems and appliances by law must only be undertaken by an organisation in membership to the Gas Safe Register.

Step 2 – Know what you want

Do you understand exactly what you need? Problems can arise from customers not asking for the right information when employing a contractor. This can cause a misunderstanding when pricing for the works.

An estimate is simply a rough guess of how much the work will cost – contractors may need to provide an estimate for the works when full information is not available at the pricing stage, an example of this could be where the work cannot be properly surveyed, in which case it may only be possible to provide a 'ball park' figure.

A quotation will give you a fixed price for the works. In all but emergency work you should expect to receive either an estimate or quotation in writing prior to the work taking place. The quotation or estimate should provide detail on the range of works to be carried out and on which the price for the job is based. There can be differences in prices for the job, the cheapest is not always the best value for money and the most expensive does not always guarantee quality. Use the following pointers to assist with outlining the work you require and its link to selecting the right contractor.

- **What exact work do you want carried out?** - Write down a description of the work or draw sketches of what you want carried out in as much detail as you can. The clearer you are about the work you want done, the more likely that you will be able to describe it to the contractor pricing for the works. It also makes sense to seek the advice of contractors during the site survey/pricing stage, you are employing them as experts but be prepared to question and obtain reasoning for the recommendations put forward. A good quality experienced contractor will be able to substantiate their recommendations.
- **Get at least 3 quotations** – It's normally considered good practice to get three written quotations or estimates from different companies with a breakdown of work to be undertaken. If you provide an outline specification for the work, you can be sure the quotes you receive will be on a like for like basis. Compare like for like and examine what the contractor is providing for in the price. Keep in mind that the cheapest quote may not necessarily be the best.

Has VAT been included? - Ask whether VAT has been included. This can often be a nasty shock if not planned for as it adds 20% to the total.

Do they give any guarantees? - Ask if the work is covered by a guarantee and how long the guarantee lasts for together with the guarantee periods for any major components supplied e.g. the boiler.

Is the price acceptable? - Most importantly can you afford the price for the works? If the price from your preferred company is too expensive it is worth talking to them to see if there is any way the price

could be reduced, but they won't be under any obligation to lower the price. Should you start working with them you can't renegotiate the price later. Be certain you know what you're getting into upfront.

How long will the work take and when can they start? - If it is a big job, make sure you get start and completion dates in writing as part of any written documentation.

Are Local Authority approvals required? - Find out if you require any planning permission or building regulation approval before any works begin. Your local authority planning department should be able to advise you. Check if costs for these are included and whether your chosen contractor is going to handle approval arrangements for you.

Do they give you confidence?

Think about how a company responds to your enquiry:

- Did they turn up on time?
- How carefully did they survey and measure?
- How carefully did they listen to you and understand your requirements?

Ask when you can expect the quotation and check whether it arrives on time. Go with your instincts and if you feel uncomfortable with a contractor then perhaps it makes more sense to look elsewhere.

Step 3 – Commissioning the work and work progress

Just because you have identified the work to be carried out, have checked the contractor's credentials and have received a good quote doesn't mean that it's the end of the process. You should check and confirm the finer points before placing the order.

- **Before you accept the quotation** - For large jobs, you should form a proper contract with the contractor – a simple contract could be signed acceptance of the quotation, a more detailed contract could have quite detailed conditions and clauses. Beware of verbal agreements as they can lead to misunderstanding, and do not carry much legal standing.

One of the most important requirements for many customers is to gain an understanding of the start and finish dates for the works. It's quite normal for these to be detailed with the quote for the works. Additional information that you might like to determine includes what time they will arrive and leave, and if they will come everyday until the job is complete.

If the work is inside your home, check whether you need to remove any furniture, carpets and curtains. Ask what safeguards the company will make to protect your home? Do they have public liability insurance cover in the event of any damage?

Check what items are excluded from the contract, pipework boxing or re-decorating as a consequence of the work will often be excluded from the price so gaining an understanding of any later works to be carried out is important.

Check whether a deposit is required and when final payment is due, it is always preferable to leave money outstanding until the job has been completed. Be sure to obtain written receipts for all payments. Never pay the whole amount upfront.

- **Keep records of what's going on**
Additions and changes - Make sure any additions or changes to the work are in writing if possible between you and the contractor because without it you might find it hard to prove that the changes were agreed.
- **At the end of the work**
Be careful about who you are paying - Always pay the company doing the work and never the individual person unless the company is owned and run by a single individual. Get a receipt for every payment made.

Don't make a final payment until you are satisfied with the work – check the work that was done, do you like the finished installation or repair? Make sure that you receive any certificates or documents for the items that were fitted during the job. This could be a boiler or shower manufacturer's instructions, building regulations compliance certificates, commissioning sheets, gas registration documents, etc.

If you are unsatisfied with the work - inform the contractor straightaway in writing, detailing what's wrong and what you feel would be a good way to resolve the problem.

If there are problems on completion, the contractor is obliged to put items right that fall within the quotation or contract, plus anything else that came about due to work taking place in your property such as damage to carpets or curtains. However it would be unfair or unreasonable to expect that the contracting company should take responsibility for items excluded from the contract for the works such as the performance of an existing plumbing or heating system – so it pays to understand the full contract requirements for the job before considering making a complaint.

About APHC

APHC is the trade body for the plumbing and heating industry in England and Wales. APHC members are qualified and professional businesses who are committed to high standards of workmanship and high levels of customer service. Only those plumbing and heating businesses that have passed our quality assurance criteria are accepted as members, giving you the consumer peace of mind.

Find A Quality Plumber

Visit www.FindAQualityPlumber.co.uk to find a qualified and reliable plumbing and heating contractor local to you. Alternatively contact the Association of Plumbing & Heating Contractors Ltd using the contact details located at the footer of this page.

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