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CHOOSING A BUILDER – HOW TO ELIMINATE THE ROGUE ELEMENT

There are over 100,000 complaints reported against rogue builders each year and the Office of Fair Trading alone receives 200 related calls each day. Here Marie Ashall, North East regional director at the National Federation of Builders (NFB), an organisation dedicated to serving the interests of small to medium-sized contractors, explains what homeowners need to look out for to ensure they don't fall victim.

People often get caught out by so-called 'Cowboy Builders', but if homeowners are armed with the right information and ask the correct questions, the chances of identifying one before they get to work on your property are far higher.

The best way to avoid a rogue builder is to actively search for a good one. Whether it's an extension, a loft conversion or just an external wall in a garden, the NFB advises that your first step should be to seek a referral from family or friends who have recently had work done.

An alternative is to check with a trade association, such as the National Federation of Builders, for details of reputable builders in your area. The NFB has strict membership criteria covering workmanship, financial status and health and safety and also operates a Code of Practice to help safeguard customers.

Our members are required to provide eight references from customers, suppliers and financial institutions.



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Members of the public can search for free by using the NFB's 'find a builder' search facility. This can be found at the NFB's website (www.builders.org.uk).

Don't be fooled by the badge though. There have been numerous cases of bogus builders fraudulently claiming membership to official trade associations, so call and make sure they are a bona fide member.

References

Almost half of those homeowners surveyed by the NFB said they wouldn't bother asking a builder for references. Those that don't however are quite simply asking for trouble.

Ask each builder you've selected to provide at least two or three – and then check them. Contact the people who provided the references and find out how happy they were with their quality of workmanship and conduct.

It is understandable that people want to get their building work started as soon as possible. Taking the time and doing research at the beginning however can be the difference between a successful project and one that ends in disaster.

Next stage

Once you've got a shortlist of builders, the next stage is to obtain quotations and make sure you get the full details of the project in writing.



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The more thorough you can be - the better. It's also important at this stage to clarify start and completion dates, security and safety provisions, catering and lavatory arrangements, disposal of waste materials and hours of working.

Also ask them at this point to confirm whether any planning permission is required for the work and whether they will need to apply for Building Regulations approval.

Payment

Payment is of course a crucial element and it's important to be straight about the terms clearly in writing.

Avoid paying a cash deposit unless you request specialist building materials or the job is likely to take a long time to complete. Don't be tempted either by the 'VAT-free' deal. The contract quite simply will not be valid and the chances of you working with someone above board are far less.

There are unfortunately a considerable number of unscrupulous builders out there. By taking action against them and following the advice detailed above, it's possible however to virtually eliminate the chances of one of them working on your home.

