

How to get a fair trade

From plumbers to plasterers, we reveal the trades that are most likely to do a good job and how to find one you can trust

The horror stories you hear about cowboys could put you off hiring any trade. But do the headlines paint a true picture? To discover the reality, we surveyed 1,843 members about work they'd had done on their homes in the past year and what they thought of the trades they'd used.

We looked in depth at nine key trades and found out which ones you're

most satisfied with and what problems you've faced. The good news is that most of you are satisfied. The bad news is that 40 per cent faced a problem.

We also focus on the most common jobs, and our expert senior building control officer, Paul Hymers, gives guideline timings for jobs (these may differ depending on circumstances) and advice on how to get trustworthy trades and hold on to them.

In addition, we also give average UK prices, provided by the Building Cost Information Service (BCIS), where possible. These prices take into account the highest and lowest regional variations, so prices may differ depending on where you live. They include VAT and standard materials. However, you must get a quote or a fixed price, as the costs quoted can differ markedly, depending on the variables of the work.



Plasterer 75% (201)



Painter/decorator 70% (411)



Kitchen/bathroom fitter 63% (244)

The percentage of members who

PLUMBERS AND HEATING ENGINEERS

In the last year, you were most likely to need a plumber or heating engineer, with boilers requiring a great deal of attention (for more on boiler servicing, see 'Keep warm this winter', *Which?*, September 2007, p55). So it's encouraging that 65 per cent of members are very satisfied with the work.

Helen Douglas from Aberdeen said: 'I think my gas man is wonderful. He puts my faith back in tradesmen.' However, Helen's happy experience is of no consolation

to the unlucky 22 per cent who encountered difficulties – most often that the work wasn't up to scratch or that the job overran.

As David Willis from South Queensferry, Scotland said of his leaking water tank: 'I could have repaired it better myself.'



Common jobs

Job: To install a boiler

Time: A day

Price: £1,560 to £4,320

Handy hint: If it's sited in a tricky place and you need extended flues, it will take longer. The cheaper price given above is for a wall-mounted condensing boiler in a small terraced house.

Job: To safety check gas fittings

Time: One hour

Price: £50 to £70+ (price from gas-elec Safety Systems, a national inspection company)

Handy hint: Engineers should check flues and appliances and carry out spillage tests. Use a Corgi-registered fitter for jobs involving gas.

ELECTRICIANS

Around a quarter of those we asked needed to call an electrician in the last year, and 70 per cent of you were very satisfied with the job done. We also found that electricians, along with plasterers, caused fewest problems. If there was a problem, it was most likely to be that the job overran or that the finished work wasn't of high enough quality, with 14 per cent experiencing one of these.

One *Which?* member from Worcester said: 'The first electrician we had lied about



his qualifications and the work he did was potentially dangerous. The man we then hired to correct the mistakes was great. He worked hard and efficiently and did a good job. He was qualified, too.' See 'Checklist', p33, for more advice on choosing a trade.

Common jobs

Job: To install a light switch and light fitting

Time: Half to a full day

Price: £220

Handy hint: It takes longer if the circuit has to be rewired back to the consumer unit (also known as a fuse box) or if access to the circuits is difficult.

Job: To rewire a three-bedroomed house

Time: A week

Price: Around £4,000

Handy hint: Rewiring takes longer if access to cables is difficult. You should use a Part P-certified electrician (see 'Don't get a shock from your bill', *Which?*, October 2006, p20).

**Carpenter 70%** (238)**Electrician 70%** (460)**Plumber/heating 65%** (840)**Roofer 64%** (253)**Glazier/double glazing 63%** (241)**Builder 62%** (324)

were very satisfied with their trades (sample size in brackets)

PAINTERS AND DECORATORS

Painters equalled electricians, with 70 per cent of you very satisfied, but you were more likely to have a problem of some sort – about a quarter of those we asked.

Timing was the number one issue, with overrunning jobs



affecting 8 per cent. As Lyn Simmons from Swainsthorpe, Norfolk commented: 'My decorators took lots of tea breaks and sometimes arrived late or went home early.'

The second biggest problem was with the quality of the work – 7 per cent of you were dissatisfied by the finished result. One Which? member from Oxted said: 'Our decorators painted the outside of the house without opening a window and afterwards I had to cut the windows free.'

Common jobs

Job: To paint a 4mx4m room with two coats of paint

Time: One painter, one day

Price: £375

Handy hint: This time includes painting the ceiling and painting gloss on skirting and architraves around doors. Decorators will need to leave time for the paint to dry between each coat.

Job: To paint the outside of a three-bedroomed house

Time: Two painters, one week

Price: £2,580 to £3,580

Handy hint: In order to gloss paint fascias and soffits (the flat board under the eaves and fascia) properly, decorators should remove your guttering and then replace it.

ALWAYS DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Ray Stocks 66, retired

In September 2006, Ray employed some local builders to build an extension to his house. Everything seemed to be going well and, although they left some jobs such as exposed pipework and a dripping gutter undone, they promised to return to complete them.

However, four months later they still hadn't come back. Ray said: 'At this point, I wrote to them to say that if they didn't return I'd use someone else and claim the cost from them.' They were adamant they wouldn't return, so Ray asked another builder to give a quote for finishing the work. This builder asked Ray if he had a completion certificate from the council. This was news to Ray.

He called Bexley Council Building Control and an inspector paid a visit. What Ray had thought was a good job actually wasn't – the roof and pipework weren't to standard and needed to be redone. As Ray said: 'I started to panic. If the builders weren't going to come back for the little jobs, what chance did I have of them doing



what the council was insisting upon?'

Ray wrote to the builders three times, threatening to contact his local council, neighbouring councils and his local paper to tell them of the builders' refusal to return and put the work right. They have now returned and are in the process of correcting the mistakes.

Ray said: 'I am annoyed with myself for not doing my homework properly, for not finding out beforehand about the completion certificate, and, of course, for not withholding part of the final payment until it was signed off by the council. It just goes to show that even supposedly sensible people like me get things wrong.'



KITCHEN AND BATHROOM FITTERS

In our survey, fitters were not as popular as other trades. You were most likely to experience a problem, and while 63 per cent were very satisfied, this was still one of the lowest figures. One Which? member from Walsall faced the most common problem – jobs overrunning. ‘Our fitter was a slow worker and it took so long that it drove me mad,’ she said.

Peter Dummet from south Devon reckons the best idea is to trust your instincts. ‘We had the kitchen refitted, which was

excellent, and a bathroom refitted, which was a disaster,’ he said. ‘After meeting the bathroom fitter, I should have ignored the designer and chosen another company.’



Common jobs

Job: To fit a new 3mx4m kitchen

Time: Four to five days

Price: £8,840 upwards

Handy hint: If the fit involves rewiring or replumbing, it will take longer and you’ll need to hire specialists. Having your floors or splash backs tiled will also add extra time.

Job: To fit a new bathroom

Time: Three to five days

Price: £1,900 to £2,050

Handy hint: A built-in shower will take extra time – often three days on top of the time given above. Any electrical work should be undertaken by a Part P-certified electrician.

ROOFERS

While 64 per cent of people were very satisfied with roofers, just over a quarter of people had a problem. Interestingly, a larger proportion of people found their roofers through them knocking on their door than for any other trade.

Gill Twissell from High Wycombe used one to remove moss from her roof, but she told us that he did a poor job. ‘In future, we will probably not use workmen who come to the door to get work,’ she said. This certainly isn’t a recommended route for finding trustworthy



trades (see ‘Checklist’, p33, for more information).

The most common problems encountered were quality of the work, followed by the fact it cost more than originally quoted and that the roofers left debris behind. One member from Burton told us: ‘It took three goes to fix a leak on a flat roof.’

Common jobs

Job: To re-cover a standard gable-ended roof with plain tiles

Time: Three days

Price: £3,460 upwards

Handy hint: The roofer should strip the old tiles and battens and fit new underlay and battens to the rafters. Hip tiles and lead work take longer.

Job: Repairing a roof with localised replacement of cracked or slipped tiles

Time: A day (two workers)

Price: £515

Handy hint: Bigger roofing jobs – having 10 to 20 per cent of your tiles replaced – require scaffolding access.



THE PERFECT TRADESMAN

Judith Kramer 68, volunteer worker

Judith from Middlesex initially asked handyman and decorator Mark Carlile (pictured) to make a kitchen cupboard door after her microwave blew up and damaged her kitchen.

However, she was so pleased with his work that not only did he make the door, he repainted the kitchen and ‘transformed it into a thing of beauty’. Judith then asked him to have a go at her living room, which he made into her ‘dream room’.

‘I’ve never known him to be anything other than cheerful and courteous

and he cleans up beautifully,’ she said.

‘Understandably, he’s got an awful lot of work on, but he’s well worth waiting for. When I fancied a ceiling draped with material, he worked out how to do it, and found a woman who could help.’

Judith was very keen to let others know how good Mark was, so she posted a recommendation on Which? Local, our new nationwide service helping you to find good local services as recommended by Which? members (see ‘Which? Local’, p33, for more information).

Building regulations

How the rules on construction apply across the UK

ENGLAND AND WALES

If the job counts as building works under the building regulations, you'll need to pay to have it inspected and certified. The list of what counts as building works includes everything from building an extension to installing a new window. If you're not sure, call your local authority. And if it's a larger job such as an extension, you should submit plans for approval before you start. The job of inspecting and certifying is usually done by your local authority's building control.

There are competent-persons schemes for trades such as electricians, plumbers, heating engineers and glaziers. If you use someone who's a member, they can self-certify their work. This means it doesn't need to be

submitted to your local authority for building regulation control and you won't have to pay for it to be inspected. Make sure you're given a certificate on completion of the work or inspection that the work complies with the standards.

NORTHERN IRELAND You should lodge your application with the local authority prior to starting work. There are no competent-persons schemes, completion certificates aren't mandatory and electrical jobs generally aren't covered by the regulations.

SCOTLAND The work may require a building warrant. You apply for this from your local council, usually before work starts, and, once it's finished, you or your trade submit a completion certificate. If in doubt, contact your council.

PLASTERERS

Of those we surveyed, plasterers came out best, with 75 per cent of you claiming to be very satisfied. They were



also least problematic (along with electricians). One member from Enfield said: 'Our plasterer was excellent. It was good work and he tidied up afterwards.'

However, it's not all plain sailing. Plasterers were the only trade where the main problem was the mess they left behind. Richard Tazewell from Bristol told us: 'We had one sub-contracted by our kitchen designer and he was Mr Messy himself.'

Common jobs

Job: To plaster a 4mx4m room before decoration, with one coat of lightweight bonding plaster
Time: Half a day to a day

Price: £500

Handy hint: If you have a two-coat system with a base coat and a top finishing plaster, this requires the bottom coat to set first and at least one day is allowed for this between the coats.

Job: Removing plaster and re-plastering a 4mx4m room, replacing and painting new skirting

Price: £1,430 (with skirting); £970 (without skirting)

Time: Two to three days

Handy hint: Allow extra time if you're having any redecoration done. This will take a while and you'll need a gap of several days while the plaster dries out.

BUILDERS



Nearly 40 per cent of members had a problem with their builder and, at 62 per cent, you were least likely to be very satisfied with the job.

The main issue was that jobs overran, with 21 per cent experiencing this, including a member from

Consett, County Durham, who said: 'It was a ten-day estimate, but took eight weeks.'

Builders were most often found by personal recommendation, with 58 per cent of you choosing this method – a very wise move.

Common jobs

Job: To build a single-storey, pitched-roof extension 4mx4m wide

Time: Eight to ten weeks

Price: £26,000

Handy hint: Extensions take longer if the ground conditions are bad – for instance, if it's soft or there are drains or water pipes in the way. Remember: you'll need planning permission.

Job: To repair damp in a 4mx4m room

Time: Two to three days

Price: £2,670

Handy hint: The time above includes replacing floorboards, plasterboard ceilings and skirting. Make sure your damp problem isn't just 'repaired' superficially. If possible, you should try and find the cause of the damp, such as a leaking drainpipe.

EVEN MORE HOME HELP

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GLAZIERS OR DOUBLE-GLAZING COMPANIES



Like kitchen and bathroom fitters and builders, glaziers weren't as popular as other trades, with 63 per cent of you being very satisfied. However, you were less likely to have a problem with glaziers than with

either kitchen and bathroom fitters or builders.

Several people seemed happy with the job but said that the after-sales technique left a lot to be desired. Marion Gourlay from Dalbeattie explained: 'The job was satisfactory, but we've been phoned continuously since.'

You were least likely to find a glazier by recommendation from a friend. Instead, members had to rely more on adverts and websites than for any other trade.

Common jobs

Job: To fit a typical casement window of 1.2mx1.2m

Time: Two to three hours

Price: £630

Handy hint: Repairing sash windows takes longer – about two days. This allows time to replace sash cords and deal with any rotten or damaged timber.

Job: To install new double glazing for seven windows in a two-storey home

Time: Three to four days

Price: £4,420 to £7,740

Handy hint: Be wary of companies that go for the hard sell. One trick is to offer an inflated price and to keep reducing until you agree.

CARPENTERS

Carpenters came out well, with 70 per cent of people very satisfied with the job. But just over a quarter of those we surveyed encountered a problem. Job quality was top of the list of problems, affecting 9 per cent, followed by jobs overrunning. However, as a member from Bishops Stortford pointed out, it's not always their fault. 'Although the job overran, it was because he had broken his wrist. We were extremely pleased with the end result.'



Common jobs

Job: To fit an internal or external door

Time: Two to three hours

Price: £265 to £855

Handy hint: Fitting a door can take longer if the frame is out of shape, as the door has to be trimmed to fit it. External doors may take longer if they need more locks.

Job: To build and fit cupboards

Time: Two days to build, one to two hours to fit

Price: £900 upwards

Handy hint: With fitted cupboards, as much as possible should be made in the workshop by a joiner. They should then simply be assembled on site.

Getting best out of trades

Our expert Paul Hymers tells you how to avoid the cowboys and keep your workers happy

Q Is there any way that I can avoid cowboys?

A Find out if the individual or company is well known in your area and have a history of satisfied customers. Ask friends and family for recommendations and check work that has been done in the past. If your neighbours are having work

done, ask them what they think of the people they're using.

You should generally avoid anyone who knocks on your

door – good workers will usually have enough jobs on. It's also worth contacting your local authority building control section, as, although they're unable to recommend individuals or companies, they may be willing to offer a selection of reputable companies or just fail to comment on your choice of dubious ones.

Always get three quotes and check the companies thoroughly. And make sure you get a contract in writing.

Q Is it worth choosing someone who's part of a trade body or other scheme?



Paul Hymers

A Overall it is, but not all trade bodies are equally good at checking members. Check whether the firm has been approved by Trustmark. This is a government-backed scheme that applies mostly in England and Wales. It certifies trade bodies such as Corgi to approve firms on their behalf. The firm will have undergone initial checks on its

financial position and technical skills. It must also have a dispute-resolution scheme.

This isn't a guarantee and you should still get three quotes and investigate the companies thoroughly.

Q How do I keep the workers on my side?

A Communicate with them so they are in no doubt about what you want done and don't change your mind too much. Provide them with tea and biscuits and, above all, don't get under their feet.



Checklist

What are your legal rights when you have work done?

■ **Written contracts** If problems arise, it's easier to deal with them if you have agreed a contract in writing before the work starts, stating a fixed price, deadline and the work you want done.

■ **Fixed price** You should ask for a fixed price, not an estimate or a quote, as a quote doesn't actually have any legal



meaning. Some will see it as a firm price. Others will use it more loosely. Sometimes they won't agree to a fixed price for the whole job in case it turns out to be more complex. In this case, try agreeing a fixed price for parts of the job and limit the areas where you could potentially be charged more.

■ **Get it checked** The Supply of Goods and Services Act 1982 says work must be carried out

using 'reasonable care and skill'. This doesn't mean it has to be perfect, but it does have to be of good quality. If you're unsure, get someone qualified such as a building control officer to check. The job must also be done within a reasonable time. This is best measured against the original estimate – so if they told you it would take ten days, and two months later it's still not finished, this would, in most cases, count as unreasonable.

■ **Problems** If the job starts going wrong or is overrunning, stop the work as soon as you notice a problem. Talk to the people you've hired and give them a chance to put things right. Where building control inspectors are involved, have the work inspected and any problems documented at an early stage. Involve them in resolving the issues.

■ **Seeking compensation** If things are still going wrong, tell the workers that if they don't complete the job satisfactorily you'll get a third party to complete the work – and you'll be seeking the cost of doing so from them. Try doing this



verbally first, and then write if you have no success. Be aware that if you do go down this route, you will have to take them to the small claims court to reclaim the costs up to £5,000 (in England and Wales). To do this you have to be able to prove that the work wasn't satisfactory or done in a reasonable time, as well as being able to prove that you gave them a chance to rectify the situation – take photographs and keep all

documents and written records of calls.

■ **Hold back** You have to pay at the times you agreed in the contract, but negotiate to hold back 10-20 per cent until it's completed. This way, if something does go wrong, you have some bargaining power. If the work is going to cost between £100 and £30,000, pay using a credit card if possible, as the card provider will then be jointly liable.

■ **Mess** If workers leave debris and mess, you could try to argue that this is a failure to provide the service using reasonable skill and care. However, it's debatable. You'd be best to agree in advance whether clearing debris is part of the contract or not.



Contacts

Building Cost Information Service 020 7695 1500
www.bcis.co.uk

Corgi 0800 915 0485
www.trustcorgi.com

Construction Licensing Executive
The Scottish equivalent of Trustmark
0131 226 8596
www.clescotland.co.uk

Consumer Direct
0845 404 0506
www.consumerdirect.gov.uk

Department of Communities and Local Government
This has a full list of competent persons self-certification schemes
020 7944 4400
www.communities.gov.uk

Planning Northern Ireland
028 9041 6700
www.planningni.gov.uk

Planning Portal (England and Wales)
Information about when planning permission is required and when building regulations apply
www.planningportal.gov.uk

Scottish Building Standards Agency
01506 600400
www.sbsa.gov.uk

Scottish Executive Planning and Building
www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Planning

Trustmark
www.trustmark.org.uk

Which? Local

Finding a trusted trade

Which? Local is a new website to help you avoid the cowboys and find good local services. The best way to find a trade is by word of mouth, but sometimes you just don't have anyone to ask. This site gives you the chance to share your experiences with other Which? members, as well as search for recommended services in your local area. It's free to Which? members and covers everything from builders to hairdressers. Go to www.which-local.co.uk



OUR RESEARCH

In September 2007, we asked 4,000 Which? online panel members to complete a survey rating their satisfaction with nine different types of trades and 1,843 replied.

We asked about the jobs they'd used the trades for. We have listed the two most common jobs under each trade heading.

We also asked members about any problems that they'd experienced and how they'd found their trade.

We'd like to thank those who took part in the survey.