



Home Owner's Guide To Extending, Converting or Refurbishing Your Home



INTRODUCTION

Acorn are a leading residential building specialist in South East London. As such, we are keen to help home owners to carry out major works to their homes. And ideally to be part of the project. But either way, we hope that you will find this document useful.

This guide is intended to be a summary of the things that you should consider when planning the extension, conversion or refurbishment of your home. It is not exhaustive and where relevant, you should seek the appropriate professional advice before proceeding.

There seem to be an increasing number of reasons to improve rather than move. Brexit uncertainty, stamp duty and moving costs to name but a few. And of course providing the opportunity to make a home, that you really wanted in the first place, to even more fully deliver the needs of your family. As well as being an investment for the future.



PLANNING PERMISSION

In general terms, you need Planning Permission if you would like to build something new; change the use of a building; or make a substantial change to a building, such as an extension or conversion.

We recommend that you consult a qualified architect or designer to advise you about the planning aspects of what you have in mind. We would be delighted to recommend one or two that have good local references.

If they advise you that you do need Planning Permission, they can help you by preparing plans for you and submitting them for approval.

It is possible, depending on the nature or scale of what you plan, even if it falls into the descriptions above, that the proposals may fall into the category known as Permitted Development. Such work does not require Planning Permission, but must still comply with clear guidelines applicable to it.

However, we would still recommend that plans for permitted development works are submitted to the Local Authority to seek the issue of a Lawful Development Certificate which is acknowledgement by the Council that the work is indeed permitted. This will save trouble at a later date, for instance if you come to sell the property.

For further guidance, visit <https://www.gov.uk/planning-permission-england-wales> or <https://www.planningportal.co.uk/info/200187/your-responsibilities/37/planning-permission>

BUILDING REGULATIONS APPROVAL

In general terms, you will need Building Regulations approval for any new construction; for any structural work to your existing home; and for changing the use of an existing room, for instance adding a bathroom, WC or utility room.

Building Regulations compliance is enforced by Building Control organisations. These can be either your Local Authority, or one of a number of private companies, called Approved Inspectors, authorised to provide the service.

Certain elements of a project are self-certified by authorised professionals, for instance for electrical and gas works and where required, replacement windows & doors.

Once you are ready to proceed to make a Building Regulations application, you will need to have your plans enhanced to add all the necessary specification information for issues such as insulation, drainage, ventilation and the like. If structural works are involved, then you will need to get an engineer to prepare the necessary drawings and calculations to form part of the application.

There are of course fees to be paid for this service, typically in two parts – initially when the application is made and the plans are submitted for review; and then at some stage after the works has started and the Building Control organisation are carrying out on-site inspections.

You can get further guidance at <https://www.gov.uk/building-regulations-approval>

On completion of the works, the key document to be obtained is a Building Control Completion Certificate, which is an important document to obtain for your property. As well as carrying out a final inspection to verify compliance, the Building Control organisation will require sight of the electrical and gas certificates, which your builder should obtain and submit.



AGREEMENTS WITH YOUR NEIGHBOURS

As a general courtesy, whatever the state of your relations with immediate neighbours, it is wise to tell them that you are planning to have work carried out.

However, if the works will take place near to or on your shared boundary structures, then you are legally required to formally notify them of exactly what you propose, two months before the works start. The Party Wall etc Act 1996 sets out the exact terms of notice periods and the format of such notifications. If you are on good terms with your neighbours and they have no objection to what you propose, then this is usually easily sorted by using standard downloadable template letters for them to sign.

However, in the event that a neighbour objects, or even just fails to countersign a notice that you send them, a dispute is deemed to exist and Party Wall Surveyors must be appointed to resolve the dispute. If you can agree on a single surveyor, then that streamlines things, but if you cannot, then both parties the dispute must each appoint surveyors. The outcome is a legal document called a Party Wall Award, which resolves the disputed issues and sets out terms under which the proposed work proceeds. The Award usually also includes a full schedule of the existing conditions of the properties, in the event that something may happen during the works.

For further guidance visit <https://www.gov.uk/party-walls-building-works/when-how-tell-them>

THAMES WATER BUILD OVER AGREEMENT

If your proposal includes building close to or over a public sewer in the London area, then you will be required to obtain agreement from Thames Water for this. In the normal course of events, with the normally encountered sewer diameters and depths, this is not too onerous. The application can be submitted on-line by you or by an agent, which could be your designer or builder, but it must be accompanied by sufficient drawings to show what is proposed. Needless to say, there is a fee to be paid. But the build over letter received from them is another important document to have for your property.

For further guidance, visit <https://developers.thameswater.co.uk/Domestic-and-small-commercial/Building-near-pipes/Building-over-or-near-a-sewer>

OTHER PERMISSIONS & CONSENTS

Fairly common issues relate to the erection of scaffolding over a public footpath or the placing of a waste skip on the public highway. Consents for these are obtained from the Local Authority and will generally be obtained by your builder.

There may well be other approvals required, depending on the scope and location of your works. Please seek suitable professional advice about what these may be.



FINANCING YOUR PROJECT

This guide can't help too much with this important area, save to say that before you proceed too far, you should be confident that you have the funding arranged. You should be able to get an idea of build costs from your designer, or from a builder once you have some preliminary drawings.



FINDING THE RIGHT BUILDER

Everyone has heard horror stories of builders letting people down, bodging a job, running away halfway through, or whatever else. But there are great reliable builders out there too. Acorn are one.

But you can find others from organisations such as The Federation of Master Builders, who independently accredit their members and require them to comply with a Code of Practice and provide a dispute resolution service should the need regrettably arise. For further information, please visit <https://www.fmb.org.uk/find-a-builder/>

Get two or three quotes – any more will just become confusing as quotes will arrive in quite different formats – and take the time to understand how they are built up. The best quotes will be detailed and will clearly state what is included; what may be a variable cost depending on clearly stated future events; and what is excluded. Acorn will always quote you for a full scope, including a professional final clean, so you know that everything is included, on the basis set out in the quote.

Not all quotes will do this, so please make sure that you are comparing apples with apples.

When you are homing in on selecting a builder, you should insist on seeing at least one completed project – not only to see the quality of the work, but perhaps more importantly to meet the customer and hear their experiences of the builder. Acorn are proud to have many happy customers who will be happy to show a potential customer around their home.

Lastly, be careful about payment terms. A builder that requires a substantial upfront payment probably needs the cash for working capital and may have financial issues that may bite you later. Acorn do not ask for any upfront payment, apart from a nominal deposit.



SPECIFIC PRODUCTS YOU MAY BE THINKING ABOUT

Many projects, even those not actually requiring Planning Permission or Building Regulations Approval, will involve some key elements that often confuse customers.

Kitchens

A gorgeous new kitchen can be the centre-piece of a revamped or extended home. But which kitchen to get??

Simply put, most kitchens are either “system” kitchens provided by manufacturers who offer a range of standard-sized units that are assembled in the best configuration to form your kitchen; or are handmade to suit your exact requirements. There is a price difference to jump from system to handmade. For some people, the premium is worth paying, but usually the right system kitchen does the job.

Kitchens generally break down into three elements – the furniture or units, comprising the frames or carcasses and the visible items such as doors, drawer fronts and end panels; worktops; and appliances. They can all be sourced separately and this generally provides the best value solution. Acorn are happy to manage this process for you.

Kitchen furniture

System kitchen are increasingly well designed and well made, offering a range of finishes and quality levels that accommodate most tastes and budgets. Honestly, you can spend a lot of time looking at very similar products.

Most kitchen suppliers will prepare a design for you. Some will insist on being paid for this, or only give you the full design once you've placed an order. We would not recommend such firms, but sometimes you have to do what you have to get a specific product in demand.

It is also possible to appoint an independent kitchen designer to design your kitchen if you want to go a little more DIY whilst using system kitchens that perhaps allow you to mix & match carcasses with different drawers, doors and panels.

Acorn can fit any kitchen, be it a system kitchen or handmade one.

Worktops

Worktops are generally either stone; a composite man-made material often referred to as “quartz”; or timber. But materials like micro-concrete and tiling are also available if that is the look you're after.

Stone really just means granite, as other softer stones such as limestone or marble are too porous and therefore subject to staining. Such stone can be sealed, but this is not a perfect solution and does require regular maintenance. Granite is available in a range of colours and is not necessarily more expensive than a good quartz. As granite slabs tend to be larger than quartz slabs, the final cost is often determined by whether you need one or two slabs of either product for your kitchen. Kitchens on the borderline may need one slab of granite, but two slabs of quartz.

Quartz is available in a bewildering array of manufacturers and appearances.

Both these materials need to be templated and cut by a stone mason. Normal thicknesses are 20mm (perhaps more contemporary) or 30mm (perhaps more traditional) but edges can be formed to look thinner or thicker than these sizes, and in a number of profiles. Acorn has an excellent relationship with a local mason who can source and work these materials at very reasonable prices.

Timber is the cheapest worktop material and is a look that many love for their kitchen. Sadly, it does require regular maintenance to keep it looking good. It can be fitted easily by the carpenter that fits the kitchen.

Appliances

Appliances are obviously available at range of price points. But the huge range of available built-in appliances should not be scary, as most are made in standard sizes to fit system kitchen carcass sizes.

We find that the internet is the best place to shop for appliances to avoid kitchen shop mark-ups. Acorn have a number of relationships with on-line suppliers that offer trade discounts, below normal web pricing, for multiple appliance purchases.

Bathrooms

Again, bathrooms provide a bewildering range of possible layouts and products from hundreds of sources.

Bathroom designs can be obtained quite easily, but equally can usually be prepared simply at home or by your designer or builder.

The products making up the design can then be sourced from wherever you want. Going to see products in shops such as Bathstore or Hugo Oliver can help you decide what you like the look of. Acorn can then help you source these with trade discounts or by finding similar products on the internet from some of our regular suppliers who offer us discounts at 10 – 15% below web prices.

Glass doors and windows

Sliding and bi-fold doors are very popular and there seems to be a huge range to choose from, which again can seem bewildering. But in fact, most are fairly similar products, so this is another area where you can spend a lot of time for little real gain. The main issues really tend to be frame colour, frame profile and handle colour.

Some manufacturers offer slim framing. We will not advise you against these, but be aware that the standard systems all have generally similar frame sizes for a reason. That they are strong and durable. So checking guarantee / warranty terms of other systems is important as we can only enforce the supplier's effective guarantee / warranty, should they fold or fail to stand behind a certain issue of defect arising.

We hope that this guide has been useful. For more information, please contact Colin or Paul on ??? or at info@acornconstruction.co.uk